

*VALIANT
HEART*

*John Hugh
Regan*

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HUTCHINSON

Kolapore Cup Medal Won by Pte. J. Regan

Well-Known Edmonton
Marksman Receives
Solid Gold Memento

A beautiful decoration in the shape of a gold insignia bearing the inscription "Kolapore Cup" and surmounted by a miniature tiger with an elephant in gold as the pendant from the ribbon, has been received by Pte. J. H. Regan, 9791 99 street, as a memento of his win at Bisley during the summer. Private Regan was the only man from western Canada on the Canadian rifle team which won at Bisley the highest award for the British empire for team shooting, the Kolapore cup.

This is the second consecutive year for Canada to win this coveted honor but only the seventh occasion in 48 years of competitions of the National Rifle association of Great Britain. Lieut.-Col. R. J. Bird-whistle, secretary of the Dominion of Canada Rifle association, in writing regarding the accompanying memento sent on behalf of the government of Canada, extends congratulations to the recipient to whom comes this recognition of success as a rifleman representative of Canada.

Signed on title

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VALIANT HEART

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A Story of a Canadian Ranch : By
John Hugh Regan : : :



To Mr. R. Shearer
with best regards

John H. Regan

Sep. 27-1926.

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WILLIAM HEART

of the County of Devon

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in the County of Devon

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TO
MY WIFE

VALIANT HEART

CHAPTER I

THE nondescript collection of covered wagons and Red River carts had not moved all day. They belonged to a party of half-breeds engaged in freighting merchandise of every description between Winnipeg, where the railroad ended, and Battleford and Edmonton in the far northwest. The prairie around the encampment was dotted with cayuses, some of them hobbled, turned out to graze; while scattered along the trail were the tents and tepees of the travellers. One of the tents, pitched a little apart from the others, belonged to John Goulet, a home-seeker who had joined the party at Winnipeg. Inside the tent, upon a couch of robes, lay his wife, Margaret. The tremendous journey, the coarse food, the vast, lonely prairie that weighed upon her spirits with a sense of ineffable sadness, had proven too much for her. The exposure to the treacherous spring weather had resulted in an attack of pneumonia.

John Goulet sat on the ground, his back supported against the centre pole of the tent, his feet almost touching his wife's improvised bed. He had not moved for hours except to cut tobacco from a long plug and to fill his pipe. It was hard for an onlooker to read his thoughts; whether he suffered or not was not portrayed on his weather-beaten visage. His grey eyes stared fixedly before him; but there was no hint in them of softness, of pity for his wife or for himself. A stranger would not have offered him sympathy; his hard, resolute expression was almost repelling. He had the air of a

man stoically watching the approach of an overwhelming calamity beyond his power to alter or to overcome.

It was nearly noon of a brilliant day at the end of April. The previous day had been one of driving sleet and piercing wind, but to-day the sky was as blue and the sun as hot as in midsummer. Crocuses peeped here and there, and the vivid green of new grass was already colouring the brown of the old. The camp was pitched beside a little lake surrounded with red willows. In these, particularly on the eastern side, remnants of great drifts of snow still remained, and the ice had not entirely gone from the lake.

Goulet heard the commotion denoting the preparation of the mid-day meal. His nostrils caught the odour of burning wood; a distant and subdued hum of voices came to him, and presently the figure of a man darkened the opening in the tent. In a hoarse whisper, as though he were afraid of disturbing the sick woman, the newcomer asked:

"How is she?"

Goulet turned his head a little, but his expression did not alter.

"The same," he replied. His tone was too level to betray either his hopes or his fears. "Just the same as last night and this morning, David."

The man put a pan of hot pemmican and a piece of bannock upon the ground beside Goulet. "Maybe she'll get over it yet," he said, his tone so low that he seemed to be mumbling in his beard. "Susan Macdonald's got the kid."

At the mention of his daughter, Goulet looked up keenly.

"How does she take it?" he asked quickly, his armour of stoicism pierced at last. A moment afterward, as if ashamed of even this small yielding to his emotions, he picked up the dish and began to eat from it with a feigned indifference to the answer.

"She bawled some," David told him. "But Susan's got her fixed all right now."

Goulet did not speak again and David went out. Goulet dug a little hole in the loosened earth near the tent-pole, emptied the contents of the pan into it and replaced the soil; he could not swallow the food, nor could he bear others to see that he could not. As he was about to resume his former posture, his eye was caught by the gold band of his wife's wedding ring, which but for the knuckle would have slipped from her emaciated finger. Still upon his knees, he took her limp hand in his and gazed at her thin, wasted face with keen but hopeless intensity. Her breath was laboured and her breast, covered with heavy blankets, rose and fell jerkily. The little hope that had lingered, a hope so slender that Goulet was hardly conscious of harbouring it, left him then. There seemed to be something monstrous in this taking of his wife before their life together had well begun, and his powerlessness, instead of humbling him, made him rebel the more. He was a toy the gods were breaking for a jest.

Presently, overcoming his emotion, he resumed his seat upon the ground and cut another fill of tobacco from his plug; his trembling hands alone betraying his agitation.

The hours crept on. David brought his supper, and the dusk began to fall. Now and again came a subdued laugh from where a tiny fire flickered among the tents. Goulet was too far away to catch the sound of conversation, and the laughter was instantly checked, as if the person laughing had been surprised into it in a moment of forgetfulness. Goulet wondered dully that there were still things to laugh at and people who could laugh.

A stable lantern hung on the tent-pole. It was the only one in use in the camp; oil was too precious to be wasted needlessly except to light the path of such a perilous journey as Mrs. Goulet was venturing upon. The lantern illuminated with a dirty, yellow glow the upper part of the tent, but below the bowl of the lamp was only the vaguest of shadows. With the coming of night the wind died to a perfect stillness and the air became cold.

Goulet got up to pull the flaps of the tent across the opening, and when he turned again, saw that his wife's eyes were open. He knew at once that she recognized him, and instinctively, that this was the beginning of the end. When she spoke her voice was very low and weak, but quite clear.

"Did you call me?" she asked.

Goulet looked at her for a moment with burning eyes. Had he called! He had not called, yet what had he been doing but calling her?

"I thought you had," she said, after a moment. "Calling a long time. I've been trying to answer."

"I wanted you," he said in his vibrating voice.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. Presently she asked: "Where's Margaret?"

"With Susan Macdonald. Do you want her?"

She made an effort to think. "It doesn't matter," she answered at last, slowly. "She doesn't know."

She watched his face with understanding eyes. She was beyond pain now and could see how he suffered. "My poor Jack!" she murmured. Then a moment afterwards she asked: "Will you hold my hand?" When her fingers were gripped in his, she said:

"You know then?"

"I know," he gasped.

"You won't let go of my hand then, will you?" she pleaded. "Hold it!"

"I'll hold it."

"I'm not afraid," she said, after a long pause; "only sorry!"

He could not answer. Silence was his only refuge. He felt as if something within him would burst if he were to attempt to speak; waited for her to open her lips again. Presently he mastered himself sufficiently to look at her; but she had sunk once more into unconsciousness.

A silence settled down that told him the camp was asleep, but he sat on through the great hush of the night. Once a coyote wailed, then seemed to laugh horribly, and

the camp dogs went to barking furiously. Hours passed—to the watching man it seemed an eternity—then the eastern side of the canvas circle that enclosed him began to grey and he knew that another day was dawning.

An hour later he felt his wife's hand grow rigid in his, saw her body stiffen beneath the blankets, then quiver and relax and he knew that she had left him.

For a time he was half frantic with the wild riot in his brain; but gradually he regained control of himself and at last, resumed his mask of stoicism.

He went to his wagon and took from it a shovel and a length of rope. Leaving the shovel outside the tent, he stripped the blankets from his wife's body, and rolled her in one of them, then wound the rope around her and knotted it at her feet. Picking up the body tenderly he carried it to the little elevation he had marked for her grave; returned for the shovel and began to dig.

The freighters coming out of the tents saw him silhouetted against the sky; saw, too, the long roll beside him; but they did not approach, and went about the preparation of the morning meal in solemn silence; the mystery of death heavy upon them.

The grave was deep enough at last. Goulet lowered the body into it, and shovelled the earth back. When the ground was level again he returned to his wagon and put the shovel away. Breaking open a packing-case, he made a bundle of the boards and carried them back to the grave where he pushed them into the ground, so that they made a low fence around the loosened soil. Upon a wider board which he had reserved for the purpose he wrote a few words, six in all:

MARGARET GOULET
WIFE OF
JOHN GOULET.

This he placed at the head of the grave and turned away.

Back in the camp he saw his daughter Margaret, riding on the shoulders of a disfigured, dwarfed, hunchbacked youth who had attached himself to the freighters in Winnipeg; and who was tolerated by them as the dogs that followed the camp were tolerated.

His name, he said, was Francet Vedene, though his English was not broken. The little girl had her hands thrust into his hair and kicked and screamed in glee when he pretended to buck like a broncho. For some strange reason, the hunchback fascinated her.

Goulet stood watching. He saw, not his daughter's, but her mother's face. It smiled at him, but no answering smile was apparent upon his grim countenance.

In an hour the campers were on the move again. Gradually Goulet fell behind the wagons as the boards he had thrust into the ground around the grave faded with the distance. He walked slowly, reluctant to leave the spot but at last could barely see the boards on the crest of the little hill. Then, being alone, he bared his head.

In two years the grass had grown over the grave, and the boards had rotted. No one would ever imagine that the body of a woman lies buried there.

CHAPTER II

THE Canadian Pacific Railway did not build through Battleford and Edmonton as Goulet had expected and hoped, but was constructed far to the South. Not that his hopes were very keen at the time, nor his disappointment very great; the calamity of his wife's death made success a matter of indifference to him. But he had to live, and the railroad, far away though it was, made ranching possible. Cattle buyers travelled the country each fall, collected the steers they bought into large herds, and drove them to the railroad. So eventually Goulet drifted into the raising of cattle. Having practically an entirely unsettled country to pick and choose from, he decided upon a spot for his ranch that was admirably suited to this purpose. A creek wandered in erratic, crazy loops between two large lakes about fifteen miles apart and formed his southern boundary. To the south of the creek was level, rich prairie which some day, Goulet foresaw, would be settled upon and farmed. North of the creek the country was broken and poor, and beyond Goulet's ranch, rose into a line of steep and grassy hills, quite unfit for farming. All through these hills were small lakes and swift creeks, the whole forming an ideal grazing ground for cattle. Still farther north, the country became level again. Isolated bunches of tamarac and spruce appeared among the poplar, and much of the land was marshy. A belt of this, like a gigantic crescent, ran down to and joined the big lakes, and this belt formed his northern boundary. The stretch of country between the swamp lands to the north and the creek to the south varied between ten and twenty miles. There was hardly an acre of this fit for farming; and, therefore, Goulet had the use of thousands of acres for

grazing purposes without the necessity of buying, leasing, or of fencing any. He settled upon, and afterwards homesteaded, a piece of land that jutted abruptly upward from the shore of the eastern lake, and when the land was surveyed, preëmpted an adjoining one hundred and sixty acres, and bought in addition, for less than a dollar an acre, a full section of land. He built a log cabin on the brow of the hill, and at night, approaching from the south, one could see the light from his window glowing across the still water of the lake, like a gigantic yellow planet.

But he had not homesteaded for the view to be obtained from his house. To him the vista was simply so much lake, prairie, and drifting cloud, and not worth a second glance. What Goulet was after was hay; the key to success in ranching so far north. Where Goulet settled, there are no chinook winds to melt the snow in the depth of winter, and cattle have to be fed from the time the snow falls until it disappears in the spring.

Practically all Goulet's land lay along the shore of the lake, which was very shallow; deep enough only in the centre, a mile or more from shore, to float a boat of any size. After winters of heavy snowfall there was always sufficient land free of water before haying commenced to allow of Goulet cutting all the hay he needed. In years of lighter snowfall, when the lake receded farther, there was still more hay, and in those years when the country was parched and the lake shrunken to less than half its normal dimensions, Goulet had more hay than ever.

A swift, clear creek ran through his homestead. It was narrow and comparatively deep so that it never froze to the bottom, even during the longest and coldest of winters. Where it passed the house it was only a few feet below the level of the dwelling. Before reaching the lake, however, it passed through a deep canyon that gradually broadened till it was fifty or sixty yards wide. The canyon had many twists and turns, and was so narrow and deep, that the fiercest wind roaring across the prairie could

find no way into it. This ravine was a natural feeding place for cattle in the winter. There was good water at hand at the cost of keeping a hole chopped in the ice of the creek, the hay was close, and there was shelter from the wind.

So Goulet was not unfortunate in all things. There were many who considered him exceedingly fortunate, as his was the only place in the district where a sufficient and never failing supply of hay could be obtained to make ranching possible.

Goulet had for neighbours, Stephen Macdonald—a brother of the Susan Macdonald who had looked after little Margaret Goulet while her mother lay dying—and Francet Vedene. Macdonald's homestead lay on the eastern shore of Goulet's lake, but was not well situated in regard to hay. The shore of the lake there sloped steeply to the water, and even in dry years he could not cut much more than a hundred and fifty loads of hay, which would have limited his ranching operations to about sixty or seventy head, had not Goulet, in return for his assistance at haying time, allowed him to cut all the hay he needed. This privilege was worth two or three times the market value of the work that Goulet expected from Macdonald as payment. Nevertheless, the knowledge that he was under an obligation to Goulet, and that there was no escape from the compulsion of accepting a favour from him year after year, festered in Macdonald's mind.

Macdonald was young, barely twenty-five, and was a tall, handsome man in a showy way. Indian blood showed in him so slightly that had he been living in a different country no one would have suspected that it existed. His eyes were a little too black and too brilliant perhaps; his skin a little too sallow, but many southern European races have eyes as dark and flashing, skin as sallow, and hair as black as Macdonald's.

Susan, whom Goulet had married, was of the same type as her brother, but her cheek bones were higher and her face was a trifle too flat and too broad for her to pass as

white. She was much older than Stephen, but did not know her exact age. She had seemed just a girl when she had taken little Margaret under her care, seventeen years before, but looked older than her husband now.

Goulet's offer of marriage she had accepted very eagerly, although knowing quite well why it was made; that he had to have someone to look after his young child. She knew that Goulet did not love her, and that in all probability he never would. But because he was white, she was only too glad to be wife to him. During her girlhood she had made several trips with the freighters to Winnipeg, and while there her eyes had been opened to the difference between the white and the "breed," and she had determined that she would not marry a breed; or at the worst, no man who was not as white as she. So for a time after her marriage to Goulet, Susan was very happy. She did not love, so did not greatly desire love. The breeds by whom she had been surrounded all her life did not often talk of love; they married as a matter of course; and when, according to their standards, they could afford it.

She could not forget, however, that Indian blood coursed through her veins, and had not been married very long before she began to imagine that if she had been free from the taint of mixed blood Goulet would have loved her. Then she began to desire his love, and, because he had none to give her, desired it the more. She had no children. That, to her, seemed an unjust act of fate.

In his youth, Goulet had received some education. When his daughter Margaret was old enough, he taught her what he could with the scant means at his disposal. Francet Vedene also learnt to read at the same time.

One of Goulet's pleasures was reading. He knew only the older writers, and when he had prospered a little, sent away for volumes of Dickens, one or two books of Thackeray's and the works of other standard authors, which he read aloud. Susan Goulet greatly desired to read, and when her husband began to teach little Margaret, would have given her soul to have been able to ask, like Vedene, that she be

taught with the child. But her pride was too great. She pretended to be intent on her sewing, or on whatever task she happened to be engaged, and assumed indifference. There came a time when Margaret was able to read, but not to understand much of what she read. There was nothing in her surroundings to assist her to comprehend a life so foreign to her experience as that of which she read. Then Goulet would explain, and gradually, there was built up between him and his daughter, a community of interest from which Susan felt herself barred. Father and child often had discussions that were far beyond Susan's very limited knowledge; they might as well have spoken of happenings in the moon.

Susan felt that she was being forced into the background. She thought, too, that Goulet should have offered to teach her, and that he did not do so she accepted as proof that he did not consider her worthy of the effort. Then she arrived at the stage when she suspected that Goulet and Margaret talked of her behind her back. There was an end to peace in John Goulet's home from that time on.

If one stood with one's back to the lake, close to Goulet's house, and looked north toward the rolling hills, one could see, perched upon a crest, a tiny log cabin. When viewed from a distance, its crossed logs, chinked with a mixture of hay and clay, made it look like an eagle's nest. This was the home of Francet Vedene, the hunchback, upon whose shoulders Margaret had been riding when her father returned to the camp of the freighters after burying her mother.

Because with the caprice of a child, Margaret had chosen the little cripple to bestow her favour upon, he had attached himself to Goulet. All people and all places were alike to Francet Vedene. Without purpose he had joined the freighters and equally without purpose, he attached himself to Goulet. It would be more correct to say, perhaps, that he went on playing with Margaret without being conscious of attaching himself to anyone. It appeared that he had always been a stray. He could

give no information about himself, and of a home or parents he had no memory. His earliest recollection was of living in a camp in the woods, sleeping first in one bunk and then in another, as the fancy took him. Of the camp his principal recollection was of the long tables at which the men took their meals. These tables, to his childish mind, seemed miles long and to have been always piled with mountains of food. He remembered the ringing of a bell and the coming of men who poured through the door in a stream; their onslaught upon the food. Meal-times had been the great moments of his life. The huge room, empty and silent; then the clanging bell, the streams of men; a vast confusion; the roaring of voices.

One spring, he remembered being taken on a raft that floated down a broad river, so broad that sometimes he could barely distinguish the banks, they were so remote and dim and shadowy. On the raft was a shelter where his friend, the cook, worked. Men came and were fed and took food away with them in the mornings. But at night, when the raft was tied up, a fire was lighted on the bank, and there was a great roaring of flames, and a big circle of red light, and beyond, under the trees, a black space, so that one could imagine that if one were to walk to the edge of the lighted circle one would find only a great black hole. But on the other side, toward the river, it was different. There the light from the flames extended far out over the water and turned it red, like blood. Beyond that, a blackness one could see through; and here and there, a light shining from a window upon the opposite bank of the river. One could always tell they were lights because they were yellow and burned steadily; they did not flicker like the stars, nor did they seem so cold and remote. Then, gradually, a chill would come from the water; a draught of air, like slowly searching fingers, and the great black spaces all round would seem to press in upon little Francet Vedene, so that he was glad to creep between the men's legs as they sat smoking their pipes, and to draw as close to the leaping flames as the

heat would allow. The warmth would send him to sleep, and next morning he would find himself on the raft, moving down the river, the sun shining, and the men all gone. He used to wonder if they went under the water during the day and reappeared with the setting sun. Or that, perhaps, the cook had something to do with it—he made the men come when he had a lot of food he wanted eaten.

One day the raft did not move; the men came no more for their meals, and he found himself in a different kind of camp. There were no mysterious woods to hide in, but instead, great piles of sawn lumber, separated from each other by narrow aisles, down which he could run and pretend he was lost. There was a great tall chimney reaching to the sky, he thought, from the top of which hung a black plume of smoke. Sometimes it streamed away in one direction, sometimes in another, but always it poured from the chimney. Francet would watch the billowing smoke for hours, wondering where it all went. He came to the conclusion that it passed through a hole in the sky he could not see, and came out again only when the sun was hidden. In this way he accounted for clouds, which were only the smoke come back. Anyone could see what happened if only they would watch long enough.

Often he watched the men working at the big fires. They told him that they made all the smoke that poured from the big chimney, but he had his doubts about this, because when they allowed him to look into the fire-box, he could see no smoke at all; nothing but a mass of leaping flame, the heat from which stabbed his eyeballs. Sometimes he went to the shed down by the water where the logs were sawn. They came up out of the river on a long chain in a never-ending line; very, very slowly; hanging back as if they dreaded the fate that lay before them. But no resistance was possible, and when their time came they were heaved upon the carriage; a man drove iron dogs into them that held them fast, and they were fed to the saw. They screamed as the steel bit into them, just as

though they were alive. They were tossed this way and that, over and back, each time growing smaller, as the triumphant saw sheared them down. To Francet it seemed when the log disappeared that there was a friendless in the world. He hated the saw, and would not have touched it, even when it was still, for anything. And when the saw was in motion, so that one could not see its hideous, curved teeth, that were like great fangs; and it was whining for prey, he watched it in terror; imagining it rending his own flesh.

No one in the mill had time or inclination to bother with the little boy. The cook gave him errands to run, and no doubt Francet saved the cook, who was fat and suffered from varicose veins, many steps. In return for these tasks Francet was given his meals. One man would buy him a pair of overalls, another boots, another underclothing. For payment, he repeated what they taught him in the bunkhouse at night after the day's work was done. The things he said were all one to Francet, who understood none of them. But the men listening to the childish voice roared their approval; the contrast between what was said and the tone in which it was uttered appealed to their sense of humour.

Then one day calamity befell little Francet. He was playing near a skidway piled high with logs. There was a cry which came too late to warn the child. He felt a tremendous blow, and nothing afterwards till he regained consciousness in a hospital, a strange, alien world where he lived in a fog of pain.

The doctors marvelled that the child survived. Their professional curiosity aroused, they did their utmost for him, saved his life, but he left the hospital, a twisted wreck. He was sent to a children's home. At the very first opportunity Francet ran away and searched for the saw-mill and the camp he had known, but it was closed and silent. He became for a time, a human scrap of jettison. In the course of his driftings he eventually encountered a railroad camp, and from that, when the winter came,

he drifted to a logging camp. Always a camp; the only world he knew. Away from one he was desolate. As he grew older he became a water-boy in the summer, helper to the cook in the winter—a washer of dishes, a doer of any odd job. He was puny and humpbacked, and even his face was disfigured. One of the logs that had almost crushed him had a spike in it which had struck him on the side of the head so that a livid scar remained. The spike had torn and ripped the flesh across his forehead, and it might have been this injury that affected his sight.

As he grew old enough to understand the conversation of the men working in the camps it seemed to Francet that they were all going west. There, things were different. Each of them was going to do something, be something. It was a land where dreams came true—if only one could get there. All men, it seemed, made fortunes out West. It was true, however, that Francet did meet some who had been there; and these, so far as he could judge, had no fortunes. He fancied, so unbelievable was this, that these men were afraid of allowing their riches to appear for fear of being robbed. In any case, what so many men were agreed upon, he thought, must be right. That was self-evident. Men could not agree unanimously upon any other subject, except that their wages were too low, and in that, of course, he knew they were right.

So Francet worked his way West gradually; always looking for a pot of gold. The places where he sought for it were not very promising. He was lucky to get fifty cents a day for the work he could do, and sometimes was cheated of his fifty cents and found himself at the end of the month with the princely sum of two or three dollars as a reward for his industry. Still he went West, and was quite sure that when he had travelled far enough his luck would turn. He drifted into the United States, then back across the border; convinced that, at last, he was drawing close to the end of the trail. In Winnipeg, blessed by his instinct for finding a camp of any kind, he

ran across the freighters and listened to their tale of a far better country still farther West. There was no gold there, they said, but it was a rich country. So Francet stayed with them, and little dreamed that he had come to the end of his search for fortune.

CHAPTER III

THE wind had been blowing hard all day, and with the coming of evening it had increased in intensity until now, at times, it reached almost to hurricane force. The weather was not cold; there had been no frost for three or four nights although it was the middle of October. The fury of the wind, however, as it beat against Goulet's house gave notice that a change was coming.

John Goulet was sitting with his back to the table so that the yellow light from the lamp would fall upon his paper; a more than week old copy of the Winnipeg Free Press. The roar of the wind distracted him. Occasionally he caressed his rather long moustache impatiently as if he were irritated with himself for not being able to control his wandering mind, and his forehead creased into lines as he fought against his inattention. With the passing of the years he had grown thinner; the prairie winds and sun and cold having had the effect upon him they have upon so many men. But there was no hint of weakness in his appearance. Rather, he gave the impression of being one who was impervious to the ills of mankind. His expression was kindly. There was a large tolerance about him that made it possible for him to be friends with all men, and even the Indians had confidence in him; would take his word as a guarantee when nothing else would satisfy them.

Suddenly Goulet placed his paper upon the table, reached for his tobacco and began to slice a pipeful from the plug. "I guess this wind's going to bring a change," he remarked. "Blow up some snow."

He had spoken to no one in particular, so expected no answer. Mrs. Goulet was sitting near the stove beading

a moccasin; contriving a many coloured star for the ornamentation of the toe. She was almost outside the yellow circle of the lamp's rays and working in an abstracted manner, her thoughts far from her task, which she performed with the nicest dexterity; manipulating the tiny beads without the slightest fumbling. Occasionally she stopped her work to replenish the fire with wood which she took from a box between the stove and the wall. She did this as mechanically as she sewed, so that she was not conscious of the interruption, and there was no break in the current of her thoughts.

There was a certain grimness in the set of her lips. Her black hair was parted simply down the centre of her head, and drawn back smoothly behind her ears to a knot at the back, with no attempt to use its luxuriance to soften or to lend charm to her face, as it so easily might have done. Her eyes were so glowing, that had they been less hard, her lips set less resolutely, her hair drawn less flatly over her head, her appearance might have been made infinitely more pleasing.

As Goulet looked at his wife he noticed, with a momentary feeling of alarm, the dour bitterness of her expression. She was no different from what she had been for months; perhaps for years. But in one of those flashes of perception that come to even the dullest and least observant, he recognized how changed she had become—he felt as if a stranger were sitting there by the stove. The form was familiar, but he knew in that moment that his wife's brain was busy with thoughts he could never understand.

"What's wrong with her?" he wondered, vainly searching his memory for something he had said or done that had distressed her. So far as he could remember, there had been nothing to arouse her resentment. Like most men, he disliked having one near him who harboured a sense of injury the cause for which he did not know. His wife had never complained. Whatever it was that troubled her she kept to herself.

With an effort he dismissed the matter from his mind. He was only fancying things, he told himself. His glance wandered to the other occupants of the room; to Margaret, his daughter, and to Francet Vedene. They, at least, gave no cause for uneasiness of mind. Margaret was trying to cut out a dress for herself. At one end of the kitchen table was spread the material of the dress to be and a formidable array of tissue paper patterns, for which she had sent all the way to Toronto. Her lips bristled with pins and two perpendicular lines of puzzlement creased her brow. She felt her father's eyes upon her, looked up, and in a moment was laughing at her own bewilderment.

"Some job!" she said. "I can't find the right way to put them."

"I wouldn't bother with 'em," Goulet replied, relieved at her laugh. "If you want a dress why don't you buy one? You've got two dresses already, anyway. What's the use of any more?"

"Two dresses!" Margaret cried, as if two dresses amounted to no dress at all. She subscribed for a lady's journal and her imaginations had been fired by the illustrations. Naturally she desired most those dresses farthest from the rough, serviceable clothes she usually wore. "I'm going to try to do it," she declared determinedly. "Others do it; why shouldn't I?"

"Why not get some sensible stuff then so that you'd have something to wear when you've got it done?" Goulet asked with a man's lack of comprehension. "A mosquito would be able to bite through about fourteen dresses of the stuff you've got there if you had 'em all on at the same time. And you'd freeze to death in the bunch of 'em with the temperature above zero."

"They're not meant for warmth nor to keep mosquitoes away," she retorted in a superior manner.

"What do you wear clothes for then?" asked her father.

"Because they're nice."

Francet Vedene was reading a book at the other end of the table. It was a copy of "A Tale of Two Cities,"

a book he had read many times already, but which fascinated him. He sat hunched over the table, reading with intensity his nose almost touching the pages. With his not very clean forefinger he followed beneath each line as if he were tracking it. Without the aid of his pointing finger the lines ran together so that he could not read. It had not occurred to anyone to point out to him that his passion for reading was gradually making his sight worse. His hair had turned partly grey, and a long hank of it hung down his forehead, over the scar left from the wound he had received as a child.

He looked up when Goulet spoke to Margaret, blinking his reddened lids. The strain he had been imposing upon his eyes had flooded them with water. He appeared to be almost an old man, though he could not possibly have been more than thirty-five.

"We're getting all swelled up on ourselves," he taunted. "Got to have fancy dresses. I think I'll get me some lace for the bottom of my overalls."

The girl looked at him spitefully. She was so used to his misshapen form that usually she did not notice it. His suggestion, however, had brought a picture into her mind. She could imagine how he would appear with his dirty overalls edged with lace.

"You *would* look fine!" she cried, laughing with so merry a lilt that her father and Vedene both wondered why she laughed so heartily. "I'll buy the lace and sew it on for you," she offered. Goulet laughed too at that. Francet was a little crestfallen, wondering where his joke had misfired.

Mrs. Goulet apparently had been paying no attention to anything but her sewing. One would have imagined that she had not heard a word of what had been said, she appeared so engrossed in her work. Yet that she had been listening was evident from her remark.

"Why shouldn't she have the dresses?" she asked. "Dozens, if she wants 'em. The more useless the better!"

There was nothing in her words to cause the sudden stop in the laughter; they expressed approval of what Margaret was doing, yet the laughter ceased at the bitter tone, and Goulet felt for a second time that evening a sudden chill of fear. Margaret looked at her step-mother for a moment as if she would speak, but thought better of it; realizing the futility of speaking. She had tried before to dissipate the growing and barely veiled hostility of her step-mother but without success, and knew that further attempts were useless. She began to gather her patterns together as if she were unaffected, but there was a suspicious glister in her eyes, and her lips were pressed tightly together from her effort at self-control. Francet Vedene crouched over his book again. He, more than Margaret and far more than Goulet, knew of the hatred that Mrs. Goulet felt for the girl. The reason of it was incomprehensible to him; but he had been aware of its growth for years. With exquisite pleasure he would have rammed the stuff that the girl was folding down Mrs. Goulet's throat.

John Goulet said nothing for a moment. He was a man of easy-going temperament and very slow to anger. He looked at his wife; looked at Margaret, saw the glister in her eyes and wondered, at a total loss, what had happened, what was happening, and what it was all about. Again he had that feeling of being separated from his wife by an unfathomable chasm. When he was deeply moved he slipped back to the more careful manner of speech of his youth.

"I see no harm," he remonstrated, "in Margaret wanting dresses. It's natural. She's young yet."

Mrs. Goulet still sewed. She had not moved nor changed her attitude, and for a moment, made no answer. In the silence that followed, the furious wind seemed to shake the low log cabin.

A smile parted Mrs. Goulet's lips, but she did not look up. It did not occur to her or to her husband to pay any attention to the presence of Vedene. They were both so used to him that it was as if he were one of the family.

"I was young too, once," she said, at last.

Goulet laughed. It was a laugh of relief. "So that's the trouble," he thought. "A little thing like that. And who would have thought it? Susan jealous about dresses!" He had never dreamed that she thought about them. Aloud, he said, jovially: "You go right into town to-morrow and buy the best dress in the store, Susan. Two of 'em or three of 'em if you want that many." He left his chair and going over to his wife gave her arm a friendly pinch. "Why didn't you say before that you wanted to dress up too?"

With an angry jerk she freed her arm from his fingers. It was past the time when a friendly touch from him could alter her mood, she had nursed what she considered her wrongs too long for that, and looked up at him with hard, bitter eyes.

"You're a fool!" she snapped. "D'you think I want the dresses now? D'you think I care for dresses? What good are they to me now? I wanted them then—when I was young too! You never thought of that—for me! Did you? I wasn't worth it!"

"You're not reasonable, Susan," he laughed. It seemed a trivial thing that she had allowed to rankle in her mind. Irritating because of its triviality, yet nothing to worry about. It seemed almost a joke that he had thought she brooded over the dark and the desperate now that it had turned out to be only a matter of dresses.

He laughed again, an awkward, uncertain laugh this time because he was not sure of the effect of it upon his wife; he could not follow the strange workings of the feminine mind. He said: "We hadn't much money in those days, Susan. Not for dresses. We had all we could do to buy oatmeal!" He laughed again; louder and with more confidence, thinking that he was on safe ground now.

"Not much money in those days!" she repeated sneeringly. "If you had had money would you have bought me dresses? I'm the one that helped you make money.

I'm the one that had the hard work to do, and do yet—I'm the one that had to go without and save and save—I'm the one that can still go without!"

Goulet walked away. He could see that nothing he could say would placate his wife. Recognized, too, that much of what she said was true. Why had he not thought of suggesting to her when they did get money, that she should have part of it to use as she wished? He sensed that it was this that rankled in Susan's mind. Not the lack of dresses, but the lack of a suggestion from him that she should have them. He should have done that, he admitted to himself guiltily. He sat down again and thrust his legs straight out beneath the table, his hands sunk deep in his pockets, his chin upon his breast. "Oh, well," he thought, "it's like a woman to dig up all the things a man has done, should have done, or should not have done." He wondered somewhat resentfully, why women were made so that they paid so much attention to little immaterial things; saw slight where none was intended. He thought of his first wife, who seemed a woman he had dreamed of now. It was hard for him to imagine that she had ever lived. What would she have been like now if she had lived? he wondered. He wished she had. That cursed trail! Oh, well! And then in a moment he was wondering if he would have neglected to suggest to her that she buy things for herself. He could hardly imagine that. With her it would have been different. But why different? he asked, rather shocked at the idea. There was only one answer, he recognized that at once. When he had buried Margaret's mother he had buried something of himself beyond the reach of Susan or of any other woman.

"It's tough," was his mental comment. He would try to make it up to Susan somehow. Then, perhaps she and Margaret would get along better. He hoped they would. It was hard to tell with women though. One could never tell what they would do, or how they would look at anything. Curious, topsy-turvy ideas they had, it seemed to him. He had a feeling akin to helplessness—wondered what

was going to come of it all. A vague sense of impending calamity lay heavy upon him.

Margaret had withdrawn to her room, her dress material and her patterns clutched in her arms. The roar of the wind drowned the slight noise she made in leaving.

Vedene had been engrossed in his reading apparently. Actually he had been wondering why it was that Goulet could not see how deep was the hatred his wife had for his daughter—and the cause of it. Presently he prepared to leave.

"Listen to that wind," he said. "Maybe, we'll have to start feeding the cattle pretty soon."

As Vedene put his hand to the door he gave a swift glance backward at husband and wife. "I'll bet there's something doing when I'm gone," he thought. He twisted the handle and the next instant it was jerked from his hand. The door was blown wide and dashed against the wall with a resounding crash. The flame in the lamp leaped high in the chimney; then, in a flash, was black out.

Through the empty frame of the doorway all three in the kitchen could see an angry, red glow in the sky. For a moment, in the dark, wind-filled room, they gazed at it motionless and silent. Then Goulet cried: "Fire!" And a moment afterward: "Fire! And it's this side of Big Lake!"

Vedene closed the door; but he was back in the kitchen.

CHAPTER IV

AFTER that first cry, not a word was spoken. The kitchen seemed to be filled with the sound of swiftly moving feet. Each person seemed to know what the others were doing so that there was no confusion and little need of words. There was the rattle of a lantern being opened, the scratch of a match, a tiny flame between Vedene's fingers, lighting up his gaunt face as he held the match to the wick. Then the lantern was alight; a pale glow at first, so that the kitchen seemed larger, more shadowy. Margaret, Goulet and his wife were almost dressed for outdoors. Goulet lighted the table lamp.

"Guard it when I open the door," cried Vedene.

Mrs. Goulet shaded the lamp with a paper; then Vedene was gone. The light from the lantern flickered around his legs as he ran to the stable; he appeared to be legs only and without a body. The light in the barn after the usual hour made the horses restless. Before Francet had one of them harnessed Goulet arrived, and between them they had three horses out of the barn and hitched to a plough in a few minutes. The red glow had now spread across the sky, and the low, swiftly driving clouds hung over them like a red roof.

"It's coming fast," said Goulet. "Let's start at the bridge and put a furrow down the bank, and across the flats to the creek. The women can back-fire from it." He called to the horses; they were affected by the excitement and started off almost at a run. The plough, on its side, a weird, ungainly instrument in the darkness, made surprising leaps and plunges as it was drawn swiftly forward.

From behind came a sharp pounding of hoofs, and looking back, Vedene saw Steve Macdonald ride into the circle of light from the lantern they had left outside the barn; dismount, and follow them, leaving his horse.

"Got matches?" Goulet asked of his wife and Margaret who were waiting at the bridge.

Mrs. Goulet answered: "Yes."

"Start as soon as we get going. Steve's coming. "He'll help you."

A few feet from the side of the bridge Goulet turned the horses and backed the plough almost to the edge of the water. The animals plunged forward and a thin thread of black began to appear behind the plough in the prairie sod.

"Faster!" ordered Goulet.

Vedene lashed the horses with the ends of the lines, and Goulet, clinging to the plough handles at arms' length was jerked almost off his feet, but held on desperately. Now and again the plough ran into a stone and was thrown sideways with irresistible force; and if Goulet had been between the handles his ribs would have been crushed. Occasionally they struck a root of silver willow, or climbed high badger hills, or fell into holes, but always they plunged blindly forward; keeping no more than a general direction.

Behind them the women had started to back-fire. Flames were now creeping slowly from the newly turned furrow up the bank of the creek—stealthy, sickly flames; struggling for existence, barely able to keep burning against the sweeping wind and giving no hint of their fearful potentialities. The women plucked long grass, lighted it, and ran down the line of ploughing, firing the grass as they ran; continually passing each other. Macdonald had joined them now, and the three made weird, gnome-like figures. Fire was now coming over the tops of the hills, racing towards them. But there the grass was short, and although the fire advanced very rapidly, the blaze was low. On the crest of a hill, and directly in the path of the oncoming fire, a herd of cattle was suddenly revealed;

in the glare one could see their jaws move as they chewed their cud. As the flames swept down upon them, they lurched clumsily to their feet. Not hurriedly, but as if protesting against being disturbed, they walked sedately along the line of the approaching fire till they came to a spot where it burnt low; stepped across, and were swallowed in blackness; it was as if they had disappeared from the face of the earth.

In the valleys and along the level stretches and wherever the grass was long, the fire swept close to the ground with the speed of a galloping horse. When it came to a bluff of aspen-poplar and willow, the branches of the trees writhed as the flames sprang eagerly and hungrily at them. There was a roar, rising above the howling of the wind; a scattering of fiery, wind-blown branches; then the fire was through and beyond, and what had been a pleasant relief to the eye had become a hideous mass of blackened sticks.

Vedene and Goulet came to the edge of the hill, behind them was the level prairie, below them the wide spreading meadows dotted with hay-stacks in clusters of three, the black ring of their protecting fire-guards vivid on the brown of the stubble. Against an ordinary fire the stacks would have been safe enough; but five or six upturned furrows afforded no protection against a fire such as was coming now. The flat was illuminated redly, and the creek winding in a serpentine course through it, reflected the red light of the sky.

Neither Vedene nor Goulet spoke, nor stopped for a moment. The nearness of the fire and the speed of its approach appalled them, and the creek was still five or six hundred yards away. They did not hesitate at the steepness of the slope before them; went scrambling down, the weight of their bodies thrown backward. The horses plunged and twisted off at an angle, yet, somehow, the flat was reached, and behind them was a tortuous line of upturned sod. Vedene lashed the horses to a faster pace, guiding them at an angle that would take the plough

some distance clear of the most westward of the stacks. Here they could feel the heat from the fire. There was no more ploughing ahead in darkness; they rushed through a red glow, came to the bank of the creek, and the ploughing was done.

Without a word both men tore at the long grass that grew at the water's edge, twisted it into torches, and a second later these were alight, and the men were back-firing. Over the hill where the plough had so lately plunged, came the women and Macdonald; they seemed to be darting in and out of the fire they were setting, as if playing with it. The heat became terrific, the air full of ashes and flying, fiery particles.

Farther to westward the fire reached the creek and slowed down in its approach, but even so, it advanced over the level unprotected meadow faster than a man could run. Reaching the back-fire the women had started down the face of the hill, it swept after them in eager pursuit. A hundred yards still separated the women and Macdonald from Goulet and Vedene; an unlighted gap of grass between them. All five were racing, their tongues parched; their lips cracking, and their hearts pounding. The fire was rushing at them like a wall of flame, leaping and roaring in the long grass, and the tiny torches as weapons to combat it seemed ridiculous. Yet the five fought on furiously, though how they endured they did not know, till only a few feet of grass remained to fire, a gap at which the oncoming flames appeared to leap. Both Goulet and Macdonald attempted to fire the unlighted spot but were driven back, but Vedene snatched a handful of hay from the stubble, lighted it, and the others saw him seemingly wrapped in flame, successfully fire the last few feet. An instant later, the two fires met, and the flames, instead of sweeping along the ground, leaped into the air and were out.

The change was magical; one moment, a world afire, the next an inky blackness. Here and there an ember glowed, or a tiny flicker of flame licked a forked tongue

into the air where the fire had found something more substantial than grass to consume. It had grown quieter, too, and the wind had fallen. There were no stars, and the earth seemed to be smothered beneath a black mantle.

Margaret sank to the ground exhausted. Now that the excitement was over her limbs trembled. She tried to moisten her lips, but her tongue was too dry. For a moment she heard the rustle of someone moving through the stubble nearby; then silence, and knew that her companions were resting also.

It might have been minutes or it might have been hours afterwards when her father called.

"Susan!" Then after a time: "Margyl Margyl!"

Half resenting being aroused from the pleasant drowsiness that had followed upon her exhaustion, she nevertheless answered her father's hail.

"Better get home," he called, his voice reaching her faintly. "Where's mother?"

"She was beside me when the fire went out. Must have gone home."

"Better go too," he recommended. "I'll be right along."

Margaret heard him hail Vedene. Their voices came to her again and again as they hunted for the horses. After a time she heard the men and team approaching, but could not see them. The men were talking.

"Just in time," gloated Vedene. "If we'd a been five minutes later it would have had the hay."

"It sure would have jumped the fire-guards with that wind behind it," agreed Goulet.

Their words mingled with the jingling of chains and the dull blows of the horses' feet.

"Been in a hell of a fix then," came Vedene's voice.

Goulet's laugh was triumphant. "It didn't get a chance."

Their voices and the creak of harness gradually became more faint. Then again her father called:

"Margyl!"

"Coming," she answered, but without moving. It was very restful to be quiet and to feel the breeze bathing her face and heated body; even the sense of being alone was soothing, and she had a feeling of pleasure that the night was so dark—while she could see nothing she had no sense of limitation.

Then, suddenly she became conscious of movement near her. So near to sleep had she been, she did not recognize the sound which had startled her, but after a moment, knew it for the swish of feet through the stubble. Even as she became aware of the nature of the sound, a foot struck against her leg, and a body plunged across her own. Oaths followed.

"Steve!"

She could not see him, yet knew that by putting out her hand, she could touch him.

"You tripped me," he complained irritably.

Margaret could not help laughing. "Were you scared? I guess you wondered what had happened to you!"

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "I thought everyone had gone home."

"I thought so too, and you see I was wrong," she said to the invisible man. "I'm going now. I should have gone before."

She sensed that his hand was groping for her. It touched her arm, but she shook it off. The instinctive movement was not lost upon Macdonald, who resented it; but allowed his hand to fall.

"What's the hurry," he asked, "let's sit awhile. It's nice and cool."

Margaret had no fear of him, and did not wish him to think that she was afraid now. When he spoke she was getting to her feet, but allowed herself to sink back, smiling in her confidence; convinced that she detected embarrassment even in the few words he had already uttered. Seated upon the ground once more, she circled her knees with her arms and waited for Macdonald to speak, knowing that with each moment of silence his discomfiture would

increase, and overcoming a great desire to giggle. Her eyes had now become so accustomed to the darkness that she could see the deeper black of Macdonald's body within arm's length of her; could see that he was facing in the same direction as herself. Presently she heard him stirring uncomfortably and felt again the desire to laugh.

"Well?" she exclaimed at last.

The rustling in the grass became more pronounced.

"It smells funny here, doesn't it?"

Margaret laughed—she could not help it. "What smells funny?" she asked when she could speak.

"After the fire," he said. "You can smell the burnt stuff."

"It does smell as if there had been a fire here," she agreed, solemnly.

Steve bridled at that. "You needn't try to be funny."

"There was no need to tell me that there had been a fire."

"I wasn't telling you."

"I thought you were."

"I just said it smelt."

"That what smelt?"

"You're funny again."

"Not me. You."

Macdonald thought about this for a few moments.

"You always think I'm funny," he accused presently.

"Not always," she contradicted.

"What have I done to you?"

"Nothing."

She saw that he had turned toward her; was leaning upon an elbow.

"Why ain't you got no use for me then?"

"I don't know."

"But you haven't?"

"No."

"Why?"

She laughed at his tone. His manner was so intense it was amusing. "I just don't," she told him. "I don't

like your looks—I don't like your eyes—I don't like your hair—I don't like your mouth; it's cruel. And you always smell of tobacco—and horses," she hastened to add.

"All those things ain't nothing," he said. "All men smell of tobacco and horses."

"Yes," she agreed, then paused, as if for consideration. "I suppose it's just you I don't like," she added.

"I *do* like you," Steve retorted.

A different tone was creeping into his voice, and he was not so subdued and humble as she had expected. She began to feel a little alarmed at his persistence, but tried not to let him see that. She realized how far she was from the house, how far from any assistance, and that for protection she had only her wits.

"I'm going home," she said with assumed carelessness, trying to keep alarm from appearing in her voice, and starting to her feet. Macdonald caught her by the arm and pulled her down. She was closer to him then than she had been before.

"You hurt me," she snapped, covering her fear with a show of anger.

"I didn't mean to."

"It's time we went back. They'll be thinking I'm lost."

"They'll guess you're with me."

"That," she retorted, "may be what you want. I don't."

"You might as well get used to it."

"Not used to you."

"We'd make a dandy pair," he said.

She laughed, making it as confident as possible.

"I'm not so soft as you fancy," Stephen exploded angrily. "I ain't scared to tackle you."

"I wouldn't marry you," she said, "not for anything."

"Well, we'll see about that."

Margaret got to her feet again without opposition from Macdonald. "I wouldn't marry you," she repeated,

seeking in her rage to hurt him as much as possible. "A breed!"

She had started to walk away when she said that, fighting her desire to break into a run; fighting not to let him see how afraid she was. Steve caught up to her and walked at her side.

"So that's why you've got no use for me," he said presently, and by his tone she knew how deeply she had wounded him. At once her mood began to alter; she felt sorry for him, and ashamed that she had said what she had.

"Not only that," she returned, eager to mitigate the effect of her words.

"I ain't good enough for you, eh? Susan was good enough for your father, wasn't she?"

She did not answer.

Steve caught her by the arm and stopped her progress.

"You can pay me for that," he said. "A kiss!"

"No!" she cried, but her fear had got the better of her now. "Don't you dare touch me!"

He laughed and pulled her toward him. They swayed backward and forward, but she could not free herself although she fought desperately. At last she was breathless and exhausted. She put her hands against his breast and tried to hold him away. It was the first time she had matched her strength against a man's, one who was determined to use his power, if necessary, to the utmost.

"You!" she hissed breathlessly. "Marry you! I'd rather marry an Indian. I'd rather marry—Francet!"

Steve laughed in her face.

"Good enough for you," he cried in his triumph, his arms gripping her so tightly that she could not move. His body felt to her as hard as a rock. He kissed her first on one cheek, then on the other, and lastly full upon her lips.

"You beast!"

He could feel the soft round mounds of her breast pressing against his chest, and the blood began to pound in his temples. A curious mixture of feelings came over

him. On the one hand, there was a kind of intoxication—his heart was beating like a sledge-hammer. On the other, he experienced a feeling of surprise that she was so helpless in his arms. It was not the helplessness of non-resistance, but matched against the strength that was in him, her struggles amounted to nothing. He had a feeling of one who gains a triumph far more easily and suddenly than he expected, and so, for the moment, is bewildered by it. He was afraid too of his own thoughts, his own power. But his grip did not relax. To Margaret his arms felt like steel cables. She tried to speak, but could not; her tongue seemed to be swollen and dry in her mouth, yet it did not occur to her to attempt to scream. She tried to bring her arms higher between them, to get her elbows against his breast and so relieve the pressure against her own; but he held her too tightly. For the space of a few moments he held her thus, saying not a word, yet she sensed something of what was passing in his mind. Terrified, and in a voice a little above a whisper, she gasped. "Let me go!"

There was not a sound. Scattered flakes of soft snow began to fall. They clung to the girl's upturned face, but she was not conscious of them; only of the dreadful beating of Macdonald's heart.

Then in the silence she could hear her father calling: "Margy! Margy!"

For a moment she hardly comprehended that it was she who was being called; the voice seemed to break in upon her from another world. She heard herself gasp: "Father's calling. Let me answer!"

The expression of Macdonald's face altered though she could not see it. The passion died in his eyes and something of the look of a man just awakening came into them. She felt the tension of his arms lessening.

"Yell!" he ordered.

"Let me go!" she demanded. That her father was calling gave her a feeling of security which was reflected in her voice although her limbs were trembling.

Macdonald's arms fell away from her. Again Goulet's voice floated to them:

"Margy! Margy!"

"Coming," she called, and raising her voice to its highest pitch, she cried again: "Coming." She knew that there was no danger in Macdonald now.

"You beast!" she cried.

He stood black and silent. She burned with hatred, wanted to hurt him, to punish him in some way for the horror she had been through, and half beside herself, swung her open palm with all her strength against his cheek. She felt his head snap back; then knew that his hands were reaching for her again, and with a bound leaped away.

As soon as she commenced to run, terror clutched her. She was not conscious of touching the ground, and every second expected to feel Macdonald's grip upon her shoulder; and her flesh quivered and shrank in anticipation.

Without being aware of doing so, she followed the black edge of the burned grass and climbed the slope of the hill without a perceptible slackening of her pace; almost unconscious of the steep ascent. Just at the crest a cluster of willows entangled her feet and threw her to the ground, and she was so convinced that Macdonald was at her heels, that she held her breath waiting for the plunge of his body, but he did not come.

There was not a sound but the wild pounding of her own heart; the silence was absolute, ghostly. The big, soft, almost melting flakes of snow were falling thicker, floating to the earth as soft as down. At length she rose and went on.

Fear of Macdonald began to leave her now and another to take its place.

What would her step-mother think? She would expect her to arrive home with Macdonald; and, if she did not, would guess that something had occurred. Margaret could feel those piercing, unfriendly eyes boring into her. What

tale could she tell? She and Vedene almost ran into each other.

"What's happened?" he demanded. The black bulk of his twisted body seemed to squirm in his agitation. "What's happened?"

She did not answer for a few moments. Then returned: "Nothing."

"You're lying!" he cried in a tense voice. "You've been running! Why are you breathing like that? You've been running!"

"It's nothing," she insisted.

"You can't fool me," he said gratingly. "He'd better leave you alone or I'll fix him."

"It's nothing, Francet!" she repeated, fearful of what he would do, toning her voice down to a semblance of calm.

Vedene would not be pacified. "What have you been doing all this time?" he asked. "You wouldn't have stayed out here so long alone." He put into words the thoughts she knew her step-mother would be thinking. There was only one way to avoid that. Macdonald must come up with them so that they could all go home together.

Vedene misunderstood her silence. "I'm going to look for him."

"Francet!" she cried, clinging to his sleeve. "Won't you believe that nothing happened. I was tired and sat down on the grass and he fell over me in the darkness. He did keep me talking when I wanted to go. That's all. Just kept me awhile."

Vedene felt that she was hiding something. "I'll fix him if he doesn't leave you alone!" he grumbled.

"We'll have to wait for Steve," she said. "Better to all go back together. Let's wait at the bridge."

They came to the bridge and Vedene perched himself upon the rail while they waited. Macdonald soon appeared. His feet struck upon the planking of the bridge before they saw him,

"Hallo!" he cried, when he discovered them, and Margaret could imagine his grin. "Waiting for me?" he asked, and laughed in mockery. "You're all right now," he remarked jeeringly to Margaret. "Safe!"

"From you," she retorted, and he laughed contemptuously.

Francet descended from the rail of the bridge. Margaret could tell from his attitude that he quivered to leap at Macdonald.

"Francet!" she called sharply, placing herself between the two men.

"Save me!" Macdonald mocked.

Francet gurgled in his throat, half choking with rage. "I'll fix you!" he managed to mutter hoarsely.

"Any time you like," laughed Macdonald.

"You're a brave man," said Margaret.

Macdonald squirmed at her scornful tone. The girl walked between the two men to the house, afraid to allow them to come into too close proximity. The hatred between them was at boiling point again, and which of the two was more dangerous to the other, she did not know.

Margaret entered the house first. Mrs. Goulet was at the stove making coffee. She looked up as the three entered, her eyes quick, piercing and curious. Her glance swept over them in a flash, then dropped again.

"Where have you been, you two?" asked Goulet, who was not in the least suspicious. "Get lost?"

Macdonald was sheepish now. He had been wondering what Margaret would tell. Whatever happened, he felt sure of his sister's support, but he feared Goulet.

Margaret repeated to her father what she had told Vedene. There was trouble enough between her father and step-mother already without more being added to it, and she knew what would result if she told what had occurred; her father's rage, his wife's defending Macdonald. As the girl spoke, she felt Macdonald's eyes upon her, was conscious of her step-mother's scrutiny. "We met Francet and came home together," she finished.

With blind loyalty Vedene came to her assistance.

"I met her just beyond the bridge," he chimed in; but his information was too ready. It did not ring true.

Macdonald grinned at Margaret as she turned away, and his grin frightened her.

CHAPTER V

MR. GOULET had gone to town and Margaret was watching the cattle. Vedene had returned to his homestead. There was no work for him at Goulet's ranch, and there would not be any until snow came and the cattle had to be fed.

Mrs. Goulet was making bread. On the white oil-cloth covering the kitchen table was heaped a pile of dough that she had taken from a big pan. She divided the pile into a number of portions and kneaded each energetically. The kitchen stove was very hot, and the doors were all closed so that there should be no cold current of air over the embryo loaves.

Lounging over the farther end of the table, Macdonald sat smoking and watching his sister at work. Like Vedene, he had nothing to do till the cattle had to be fed, and he spent the greater part of his time with the Goulets, which was one of the reasons why Margaret was absent.

"What happened the other night," asked Mrs. Goulet.

Macdonald did not like the question. He had expected his sister to make some such inquiry at the first opportunity after the fire, but she had not done so, and gradually he had allowed himself to imagine that she had not noticed anything unusual. Yet he had hardly been able to convince himself of that; he knew her too well, feared too much, what was to him, her uncanny power of observation. Then he had come to think that for some reason she did not intend to question him. Now, just when he had begun to fancy that she had forgotten all about the matter she had flung her question at him.

Stephen took his pipe from between his teeth and grinned. When he was confused he always grinned. It was not what had been done that embarrassed him, but the

impossibility of putting it into words. How could he tell what had happened? He hardly knew himself. In a way, nothing. Just a moment of madness, a rush of blood to his brain, and a frantic beating of the heart such as he had never known before. Not a word spoken that confessed these things, or acknowledged them. Yet the consciousness that a mark had been overstepped, and that Margaret knew it. He was young and really not at all vicious. He held his pipe up and looked at it as though it aroused his curiosity. His manner afforded ample confirmation of the fact that something out of the usual had occurred.

Mrs. Goulet regarded him intently, expecting him to lie, and under the scrutiny of her sharp eyes Steve grew exceedingly uncomfortable.

"What night?" he demanded, raising his voice with a show of truculence that did not deceive her in the slightest.

Mrs. Goulet was not pleased. It did not occur to her that he was ashamed, but it did occur to her that Margaret had mastered him in some way. She smiled contemptuously.

"The night of the fire."

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Nothing. Why?"

She put the last of the dough into the baking pans and placed them upon a shelf at the back of the stove; covering them with a cloth. Then she stood rubbing the flour from her fingers and looking at Steve; the unpleasant smile still upon her lips.

"What did she do to you?"

This was turning the tables upon him with a vengeance; it was so wholly unexpected. "What did she do to me? She didn't do anything to me!"

"Only smacked your face!" Mrs. Goulet cried mockingly. "It must have been a hard smack. The marks of her fingers showed."

Macdonald flushed. Like all young men he was very sensitive to a reflection upon his manhood, and he conceived, as Mrs. Goulet knew he would, that to allow anyone to

chastise him was degrading. Being youthful he could see no better way to answer than by blustering.

"You seem to know a lot," he snarled. "If you know so much and can see so much, what d'you want to ask me questions for?"

"So you tried to kiss her!" Putting her hands on the end of the table Mrs. Goulet rested her weight upon them and leered maliciously at him. Steve squirmed upon his chair and wished that he had stayed at home.

"You don't know it all," he sneered. "You're wrong. I did kiss her."

"Did you!" Her voice went up in mock admiration. "Did you then! That was bold of you, wasn't it?"

"Look here!" he shouted. "You leave me alone! It ain't nothing to do with you."

"I could tell Goulet. I wonder what he would do? Would he let you have hay this winter, then, d'you think? I could tell Vedene. He'd kill you."

The last thrust fell harmlessly. "That runt!" Macdonald retorted, but Mrs. Goulet saw that her threat to tell Goulet had gone home. Without the extra hay from Goulet, Steve was helpless. He was dependent upon it.

"You're bluffing!" he went on. "You wouldn't tell!"

Mrs. Goulet said nothing to reassure him.

"Vedene may be a runt, but a bullet from him is just as bad as a bullet from anyone else."

"Aw, quit that!" replied Macdonald carelessly. "He's too scared. I ain't afraid of him."

Mrs. Goulet was of a different opinion.

"I'd be more afraid of him than of Goulet. Vedene knows that he could do nothing with you without a gun."

Macdonald wondered what was in her mind. She had always been friendly to him; urging him to the pursuit of Margaret. Now she appeared to have turned; to be warning him of the dangers he might be running into.

"What are you up to?" he asked in bewilderment. "What's the big idea?"

Susan feigned surprise. "Up to!" she exclaimed. "What d'you mean by that?"

"D'you want me to quit bothering about her?" Steve inquired irritably. "I ain't so stuck on her. There's lots of girls I like better. She ain't the kind I'd go crazy over. A damned sight too free with the frozen eye-ball for my taste."

"Yes," Mrs. Goulet agreed, "she throws a scare into you all right. But some day she'll be getting a husband. Some day Goulet will be dead, and then her husband will have all the hay. Most men keep all the cattle they can, and then where will you be?"

"But you'll have some say in it," protested Macdonald. "You ain't going to die right away."

"I might die first! What'll you do then?" She paused for a moment as if trying to control the passion that was rising in her. "Don't figger on me," she warned. "If you let her go, then I don't care what happens to you. You can——"

"Go to hell!"

"You've said it," she retorted vindictively. "I'd try to bust you all I could!"

Macdonald was more mystified than ever. "Why are you trying to choke me off trying to get her then?" he asked. "I'm willing to go the limit. It ain't much use I guess. The more I go after her the more she gets sore, and I don't want her enough to hurt me."

Mrs. Goulet seated herself in a chair and wiped her hands on her apron with a wringing motion.

"You fool!" she ejaculated bitterly. "I could see she'd scared you. If I was a man like you, I'd—I'd——" Her fingers clasped and unclasped. "I'd fix her!" she said after a moment. Then she asked, resuming her sneering tone: "So you kissed her and she didn't like it?"

"I guess so."

"What did she do?"

"She couldn't do nothing. I had hold of her!"

"Did you hurt her?" It was evident that her motive in asking this was not prompted by anxiety for Margaret's welfare. Her eyes gleamed with malicious anticipation of an answer in the affirmative, that her hate would be gratified.

"I had her tight," Steve evaded. His eyes became overcast, and for a moment he could feel the softness of Margaret's body again, and the magic of that embrace renewed its spell. "I had her pretty tight," he added.

"Did you hurt her?" Susan persisted.

"I guess not," he replied, wondering if he had.

"You guess not!" Mrs. Goulet sneered. "And then what?"

"I let her go. Goulet called, and I let her go."

"You let her go, did you!"

"She answered Goulet, and then she stood looking at me. She didn't seem to be scared. I couldn't see her face. If I had, I'd known she was going to take a wallop at me. She just stood in front of me, I guess, all a-boiling inside, and then she said: 'You beast!', just spitting it out as if the words was spurs that rowelled her tongue. Then she hit me a lick."

Mrs. Goulet's great, black eyes glowed viciously in the creamy pallor of her broad face. "And then?" she breathed. "And then?"

"She ran then."

"She ran!" she repeated slowly. "You let her go and she ran!" She looked at Stephen as if she could kill him. "God!" she breathed, and swayed back and forth in her chair.

"You needn't get so sore," protested Macdonald. "You're getting all worked up about nothing."

"Look after yourself!" she warned, in a shrill, passionate voice. "You need to!"

Macdonald stood up and took his hat from where it was lying upon a chair against the wall. "I guess I'll go home," he said.

"Is that all that happened?"

Macdonald twisted his hat in his fingers. "Aw, nothing much more," he returned indifferently.

That reply did not satisfy. "What was it?"

"She said she'd rather marry Vedene."

"Marry Vedene!" That was a new thought for Mrs. Goulet. "Marry Vedene!" she repeated in bitter musing. "He'd be some husband for her!" And then slowly, as if the thought gave her satisfaction: "I'd like to see her married to Vedene!" and she laughed.

"I'm going," Steve announced.

But Mrs. Goulet had not finished yet.

"She's white," she said. "Don't you want to get a white girl?"

She could not understand Macdonald's indifference to that. Time after time she had tried to awaken in him a desire for Margaret on the ground that she was white, and, apart altogether from her desirability as the prospective owner of much hay-land. "You're nearly white yourself, Steve," she went on. "No one could tell you wasn't unless they knew you. Strangers are coming in here now. They are going to come in thicker and thicker until all the land's settled up. The old ones are going to be swamped. Goulet says so, and you can see them beginning to come now. Some day there's going to be a railroad through here and then they'll come quick. If you had a white wife they'd forget all about you being a breed." She went on as an afterthought: "And especially if you had all the hay—the only man who could keep a lot of cattle."

Steve was wearied by her discourse. He threw himself into a chair, drew one leg over the other resignedly; then spat upon the floor.

Mrs. Goulet started at that. She had been brought up in a home in which all the males expectorated whenever and wherever the fancy took them. Goulet, however, objected to the practice; no man did it twice while he was at home, and Susan had cultivated her husband's objection to the habit. She had to scrub the floors and that may have helped her to become so fastidious.

"You needn't do that because Goulet's out," she snapped.

"Goulet!" sneered Steve.

"Goulet!" she repeated after him. "You'd be scared to do it if he was home!"

"He's white!" he retorted, returning her sneer.

"And you're nearly white. Why don't you try to be like Goulet? I'd be proud of you then." The momentary wistfulness in her voice betrayed her desire to satisfy her natural longing to have someone of her own to look up to; her desire to have one, at least, who was going the way she wished; carrying on the battle she was fighting so bitterly.

But the meaning of her tone was lost upon Steve. Youth is too self-satisfied and too confident of the superiority of its views, to be able to understand the futile longings of those who appear old to them.

"You make me sick with that darn song of yours all the time," he growled. "I ain't so particular about being white. Git the money. Being white don't matter."

Mrs. Goulet's moment of softness passed. "You won't get the money unless you get Margaret," she retorted, her viciousness returning. "Where are you going to get hay if you don't get it here?" To both of them this district comprised the whole North-West. It did not occur to them that other places might be found as well situated as Goulet's ranch.

"I ain't quit trying to get her," Steve replied sullenly, but yielding to his sister's insistence. "I just seem to make her more mad all the time. I ain't got no chance with her."

"Did she say any more that night?"

Steve thought for a moment.

"Something," he growled, knowing that there was going to be an explosion.

Mrs. Goulet knew instinctively that she had come to the crux of what had happened as far as she was concerned.

"What was it?" she inquired.

The malevolence of her expression made Steve sorry that he had not denied that Margaret had said anything more. He squirmed in his chair.

"Aw, nothing," he evaded.

"You'd better not keep on lying to me!" she threatened, in an edged voice.

"All right then! If you will have it, have it!" he cried. "I hope you'll feel better when you know. A fat lot of good it'll do you. She said I was a breed! That she'd just as soon marry an Indian!"

Macdonald had expected an outburst, but none came. Susan's eyes leaped into flame, her lips twitched and two deep furrows creased her brow as if she were in agony, but she said not a word. Presently she commenced to sway backward and forward in her chair.

Stephen felt uncomfortable. His sister's behaviour had all the force of the unexpected, and as if he were defending himself, he said: "I told her you were good enough for her father."

Again Mrs. Goulet did not answer, but her eyes flashed ominously and he knew she had heard what he said. He was uneasily aware that he had increased her rage rather than diminished it. She stood up and began to pace up and down the kitchen in jerky strides, occasionally twisting her hands in her apron distractedly; now and again emitting a peculiar noise halfway between a moan and a snarl.

Steve stared at her fascinated. Her rage was so extreme that it choked her; made her incapable of finding relief in words. Macdonald, dull as was his imagination, vaguely sensed that here was a rage bordering closely upon mania. It was inhuman. He could stand the sight of it no longer.

"I'm going," he said, making for the door, but glancing backward over his shoulder as if fearing to take his eyes from her till the door was between them. Mrs. Goulet did not look at him; paid no attention to his words.

"Phew!" he ejaculated, drawing a deep breath of relief when the door was closed behind him. Passing the window

he peered in. Mrs. Goulet was rocking herself again, but Stephen could tell that she did not know what she was doing. Her lips were working and her face was drawn.

"God!" he breathed, awestruck for the first time in his life. "She's gone crazy! I'll bet there's hell a-popping."

He mounted his pony and rode away at a gallop.

CHAPTER VI

THE light was falling when Margaret returned home. She came into the house with a rush, bringing with her the fresh scent of the out-doors. Her gauntleted gloves she threw into a chair in passing.

"Golly, my hands are cold," she exclaimed, extending them over the hot stove. She gave a keen glance at her step-mother who bore no signs of the paroxysm of rage that but a few hours before had frightened Stephen Macdonald. On the contrary, her mood appeared to be more genial than usual. She was engaged in the prosaic task of darning her husband's socks. The loaves that had been baked, lay bottom upward, upon the end of the table. The kettle was singing on a corner of the stove, and every now and then the lid was forced upward with a sound like the bursting of a pod.

"It's been a fine fall," said Mrs. Goulet.

"We're coming to the end of it now though. The wind is real cold. It made my nose tingle." And Margaret rubbed that member tenderly. "I guess it's red!"

"As long as the snow don't come we're saving hay," Mrs. Goulet remarked. "Maybe we'll have a lot to sell in the spring."

"Ice is coming on the lakes, and the cattle won't be able to water at them much longer. They'll have to come down to the creek, and then they'll have to be fed."

"Oh well," observed Mrs. Goulet resignedly, "it's late in the year anyway."

Margaret drew a chair close to the stove. After the cold and the wind, the grateful warmth of the kitchen felt luxurious. She had sat there only a few moments when she began to feel drowsy. It was not a desire to sleep

although it could easily have slipped into that. Rather it was as if her consciousness was lulled in a sea of comfort that rolled up on her in sensuous waves.

The light gradually faded but neither of the two women offered to light the lamp. Mrs. Goulet allowed the sock she had been darning to fall into her lap; though her fingers still touched it idly. Her eyes stared into vacancy and she was lost in reverie.

In the dim light she appeared gaunt. Her high cheek bones were accentuated by the shadows where her cheeks receded. She was dressed in black, relieved only by the white apron she wore. The line of her bodice at her bosom barely curved. She appeared to be almost flat.

Presently Margaret found herself studying her step-mother's face. Not the features of it—they were too familiar to be studied—but its expression of ineffable sadness. There is no expression more poignant in its appeal than that of one who is bereft of hope. To possess hope is so vital a condition of existence that to see one who has it not, strikes a discordant note in the harmony of creation.

Sitting there in the dusk and the silence, Margaret knew that her step-mother was without hope. Margaret had no experience of life to enable her to appreciate all that the thought involved, but instinctively she knew that she was looking upon a tragedy in another's life that was very terrible. She wished to offer sympathy, but was afraid to break the silence; felt that to do so in that strange moment would be sacrilege.

The girl had been softened, too, by her step-mother's reception. It had been more friendly than she had anticipated. Used to hard and bitter looks, she expected them; they had been her step-mother's normal greeting for months; perhaps for years; so gradually had Margaret become aware of them. That had been the girl's reason for entering so boisterously. She knew that her father would not be home, and that her step-mother would in all probability be alone, and by the manner of her entry had

hoped to show that she was unconscious of her step-mother's sour regard. Now Margaret felt the self-reproach of the tender-hearted who have unwittingly judged wrongly and too harshly, and for a moment, saw only the other woman's terrible loneliness. Mrs. Goulet ceased to be a step-mother and became just another woman, something of whose mind the girl could read but not understand. She put out her hand and touched the older woman upon the arm in mute sympathy. For a moment Mrs. Goulet seemed to be unaware of the caressing fingers. She looked at the girl almost stupidly, then her eyes travelled down to the fingers resting lightly upon her, and her eyes flamed as she snatched her arm away.

Hurt and repelled Margaret drew back. It was the first time she had made such an advance, and she resolved then, that it should be the last. She got up, lighted the lamp and the spell that had held her was broken; it seemed unreal already, as if it had never been.

There was a long, awkward silence. Mrs. Goulet began to prepare the evening meal. Two persons, however, cannot remain alone together for any length of time without speaking and not be aware of a well-nigh intolerable strain. After a time the silence will become unbearable. Perhaps because of the Indian strain in her Mrs. Goulet endured it the longer. Margaret felt that she must say something.

"Steve been here?" she asked in as casual a manner as she could assume.

Mrs. Goulet's eyes flashed over her.

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I just wondered."

Mrs. Goulet was frying some steak. Margaret was arranging the table.

"What made you wonder?" pursued Mrs. Goulet. "You know he comes almost every day."

"Oh yes. I just wondered if he had been here to-day."

"You don't like him, do you?" The question was asked in too quiet, too indifferent a tone. Because of that

Margaret felt certain that she had been the subject of discussion. Perhaps Macdonald had told her step-mother something of what had happened on the night of the fire?

"I don't," admitted the girl.

There was a decision in her tone that gave finality to the words. Mrs. Goulet did not reply. They seated themselves at opposite sides of the table and began the meal. The hours in the saddle, and the keen fresh air had given Margaret a good appetite, but Mrs. Goulet ate little, and that little automatically. Presently, as if there had been no break in the conversation, she asked:

"Why don't you like him?"

Again Margaret had a feeling that the words masked an intention she could not fathom, and replied guardedly:

"It's hard to tell. I've never thought about it. I don't know; I just don't—that's all."

"He'd make a good husband," said Mrs. Goulet persuasively.

Margaret was not interested in Macdonald's qualities as a husband. "Perhaps," she agreed listlessly. "I guess he would."

Mrs. Goulet's eyes lifted and fell. Margaret noticed as her step-mother raised her cup that it quivered quite perceptibly. Mrs. Goulet regained control of herself, however, while she swallowed her tea.

"It would be different if he wasn't a breed?"

Margaret knew that her step-mother was sensitive upon this point, and wondered why she mentioned it. That her step-mother should be continually enlarging upon Macdonald's desirability as a husband, Margaret expected. The girl had grown so used to it that it had ceased to bother her greatly; had reached the point where this love-making by proxy appealed to her sense of humour. When she answered her step-mother, she little dreamed of the depths of emotion stirred by her light words.

"I don't like him, but I don't know that his being a breed had anything to do with it."

Mrs. Goulet's lips parted in an incredulous smile. To her, Margaret's words were simply another attempt to deceive. The smile quickly faded, however.

"Steve thinks a lot of you."

"Does he?" Margaret exclaimed. "I'm obliged to him for that; but I wish he didn't."

"He's getting on well, too," insisted Mrs. Goulet.

"With the help of father's hay," retorted the girl.

Mrs. Goulet's eyes flashed ominously.

"Who has been putting that into your head?"

"Nobody," Margaret answered quickly. She saw that she had given her step-mother a fresh ground of suspicion. "Anyone can see it," she explained. "No one needs to be told."

"Anyone can see it!" repeated Mrs. Goulet. It was a new suggestion to her and touched her upon another sore spot. "I suppose then that everyone thinks your father is a fool to let him have it?"

"I don't know what they think," replied Margaret. "No one has said anything to me about it. But please don't keep talking about Steve. Father doesn't mind him having the hay."

"He's a breed and gets helped along," commented Mrs. Goulet bitterly. "No wonder you think you're too good for him!"

"I don't think I'm too good. I just don't like him, that's all."

Margaret began to clear the dishes away. Mrs. Goulet said no more, but sat at the table, her head propped upon her hands, her brilliant eyes staring straight before her.

Margaret washed the dishes and put them away, but hesitated over disturbing her step-mother by removing the cloth, and decided to leave it. There was the feeding and milking to do, and she dressed herself to go out. When she threw back the glass of the lantern, Mrs. Goulet looked up, and for a moment, stared at the cleared table. Then her eyes travelled to the cupboard as if she were surprised to see that the washing of the dishes was done.

She watched Margaret light the lantern, and then she noticed that the cloth was still upon the table.

"Why did you leave this?" she asked. "For the breed to clear away?"

The girl was astonished. It was the first time she had heard her step-mother refer to herself as a breed.

"Oh, mother!" she cried. "Why do you speak like that! It was only that I didn't want to disturb you."

"I see," sneered Mrs. Goulet. "You've grown careful of me all of a sudden."

She stood up and began to fold the cloth.

"Let me do it?" cried Margaret, eager in her anxiety to propitiate her step-mother. Mrs. Goulet, however, had altered her mind.

"We'll leave it on for your father when he comes home," she said. "He'll want something then, and because he's white, he'll like a nice white cloth, and me to wait on him like I've waited so many years. That's all I'm fit for."

Margaret had never seen her step-mother in such a mood as this. There was a bitter intensity in her voice that shocked the girl. She waited while her step-mother put on her out-door clothes, but did not speak to her, not knowing what to say. She wished her father were at home, but he would not return until late. She was troubled by a feeling that something was bound to happen before then.

Mrs. Goulet followed her from the house, stepping at her heels. Margaret wondered if she were walking too fast or not fast enough; hurried her step, and then slackened her pace.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Mrs. Goulet sharply.

"I thought I was walking too fast," Margaret said over her shoulder.

Mrs. Goulet sneered: "Don't mind me. I don't matter. I'm only a breed."

Above the roof of the barn Margaret could see Vedene's light in the shack upon the hill. The light seemed comforting, as if it told her that there was one friend not far

away. She would have liked to drop the lantern, taken to her heels, and run to Vedene's, there to remain till her father's return.

"There's that fool blinding himself reading his rubbish, I suppose," said Mrs. Goulet, following the direction of the girl's gaze.

The stable door was wide open, yet the bodies of the animals warmed the air inside the building, and there was a chorus of whinnies from the horses and the rustle of straw as the two cows, kept for milking purposes, shuffled to their feet. In the box stall at the farther end of the barn the stallion began to paw restlessly. Margaret wondered if she would have to feed him. Usually Mrs. Goulet did that in the absence of Goulet and Vedene. With her step-mother in her present mood, however, Margaret feared that the task would be left to her.

There were two teams of horses in the barn as well as a saddle pony for Margaret. The two women took them down to the creek for water, and Margaret was careful to lead them so that there would be no cause for complaint. When they returned, Margaret clambered up the ladder to the loft to throw down the hay, and afterwards carried in the straw to bed the animals for the night. The sound of the feeding animals was soothing, and the scene in the kitchen already seemed grotesque and unreal to her. She began to think that she must have imagined or exaggerated her step-mother's behaviour. They came to the milking and the hiss of the warm fluid into the pails could be heard when there was a lull in the sounds of mastication. The stallion still remained unattended. Margaret could hear him snuffling at the door of his stall; now and again he pawed impatiently.

Mrs. Goulet finished milking first. She carried her pail outside the stable and put it down close to the door; returned and picked up a fork.

"Let me feed him!" Margaret suggested as her step-mother passed.

Mrs. Goulet grinned sardonically.

"No," she returned. "I'm not afraid of him, and besides you're white. It wouldn't do to have anything happen to you! What would your father say?"

There is nothing so crushing as to have a good intention turned back on one and made to appear evil. Margaret took the lantern from the peg on which it hung and half blinded by the tears that welled into her eyes, followed Mrs. Goulet as she thrust the fork into some hay and carried it to the loose-box. Mrs. Goulet rested the hay upon the floor, unlatched the door and went in, while Margaret, standing in the doorway, held the lantern high above her head.

The stallion was loose, and retreated to the farther end of the stall, apparently quiet enough, but both the women knew that he was not to be trusted.

Mrs. Goulet talked to him.

"Hallo, Tom," she said genially. "You won't kill me to-night, will you? You're going to kill someone some day, aren't you though? And when you do, I hope you'll do it quick. Not torture them slowly—smash the life out of them like I would out of a bug!"

The stallion went toward the manger and the hay. He was not a very big horse, nor pure-bred. Margaret was prepared to see him strike viciously, or for his teeth to be bared for a flashing bite, as she had sometimes seen him attempt with her father; but to-night the animal seemed quite friendly.

"You wouldn't hurt me, would you?" crooned Mrs. Goulet.

The evil in her seemed to call to the evil in the horse. It was as if he recognized a kindred spirit; but Margaret saw that her step-mother kept in such a position that she could use the fork as a weapon if necessary. Mrs. Goulet's expression was so rapt, her eyes gleamed so brightly in the dim, yellow rays of the lantern while she talked, that the idea came to Margaret that her step-mother desired the horse to attack her so that she might have an excuse to use the fork. The thought sickened her.

"Let us go," she breathed. She knew that such an excuse might occur at any moment.

Her step-mother looked at her and laughed.

"Scared!" she sneered. "You shouldn't be scared. You're white you know. It's only breeds that are scared. No good!"

The challenge was too much for the girl. She forgot her fear.

"I'm no more afraid than you," she replied, walking into the stall and standing at the older woman's side.

"You're brave, aren't you?" Nevertheless Mrs. Goulet took the girl's arm and went with her from the stall, afraid perhaps, of what her husband would think if anything should happen.

When they reached the house Mrs. Goulet resumed her darning. Margaret strained the milk, poured it into pans to cool, and carried them to the little log milk-house, a few yards from the kitchen door, where she stayed as long as possible. The thought of sitting alone with her step-mother was almost intolerable to her; there was no knowing what she would say. Margaret lingered till she became afraid that her absence would be turned into a fresh source of offence, but before entering the house, listened with strained intensity for the sound of wheels upon the frozen trail. In the silence, as profound as in a cathedral, she knew that the thud of horses' feet and the rattle of the democrat would reach her from a long distance, but except for the occasional pawing of the stallion in his stall, she could hear nothing.

Mrs. Goulet did not look up and Margaret took a seat near the kitchen stove, which hardly yielded enough heat to keep the house warm, although it was red over the fire-box. Margaret raised one of the lids and looked into the glowing fire, doubtful whether the stove was doing its best.

"We'll have to get the heater going soon," she remarked.

"It's warm enough," said Mrs. Goulet decisively, and nothing more could be said on that point.

There was a long silence. Margaret thought of getting out the material for her dress and doing some work upon that, but was afraid of calling forth some trenchant comment upon her frivolous taste, and abandoned the idea.

Going to the shelf she took down a book, and still trying to be friendly, asked:

"Shall I read to you?"

"Can't you find something better to do than that?"

Margaret put the book down and returned to her chair.

"I wonder when father will be home?" she observed presently, unable to remain silent longer.

Mrs. Goulet looked up suspiciously.

"Are you waiting for him?"

"Why, no," Margaret answered, surprised.

Mrs. Goulet bent to her work again.

"He won't come any the quicker for your wondering."

The long silence that followed was maddening to the girl. Was there nothing she could say or do that was right?

"If you can't stop fidgeting you'd better go to bed," said Mrs. Goulet in a cold voice. "That is unless you want to see your father!" The tone in which it was uttered made it impossible for the girl to remain.

"Are you going too?" she asked.

Mrs. Goulet shook her head.

"No, I'm not going. Your father may want something to eat. I'll wait up for him. He should have me to wait for him," she added mockingly. "That's all I'm fit for. To wait upon him and you. You're both white." She stopped, looked at the girl and said, a sharp change in her voice: "Go to bed. I'll wait till he comes home. I've something to say to him."

Margaret wondered what it was,

CHAPTER VII

MRS. GOULET heard the sound of the democrat coming long before it reached the door. She had the lantern lighted and was waiting outside when Goulet drove up.

"Hallo!" he called. "That you, Susan?"

She held the lantern low, swinging in her hand, so that he could not see her face.

"It's me," she replied, going toward him.

"Why did you wait up? There was no need. I'm late."

"It doesn't matter. I wanted to."

There were some groceries in the body of the democrat which Susan carried into the house, then Goulet took the lantern and drove to the barn. When he returned, his wife had the parcels he had brought untied and most of their contents put away in their proper places. He shut the door behind him and said:

"Golly, it looks comfortable in here. It's good to be home!"

Mrs. Goulet had prepared the table again. There was a plate, cup and saucer. A cold joint stood ready to be carved, and there was bread and a jar of pickles. The kettle was singing and the tea-pot stood with its lid off, ready to receive the water.

"You're some wife, Susan," Goulet said in approval. "Lucky for me I've got you!"

"Do you think so?"

He looked at her keenly, a little chilled by her tone, but chose to ignore it. "I should say I am." He removed his fur coat and hung it upon a nail. She noticed he had brought a parcel in with him which he must have kept beside him upon the seat of the democrat.

"I've brought you something, Susan," he cried jovially, trying to coax her from the morose mood he perceived she was in. "By golly, it's slap-up too!" He took the mysterious parcel to the clear end of the table and began untying the string. "You'll think you've got as good a husband as I know I've got a wife when you see it."

"Have supper first," she suggested. "Leave that till afterwards."

Goulet was willing to do anything to humour her, but he was rebuffed at her lack of curiosity nevertheless.

"All right," he agreed. "It won't spoil for the waiting."

He carved himself some of the meat and sat down. His wife made the tea, then stood by the stove watching him, hardly taking her eyes from his face, so that at last he grew uneasy under their intent and steady regard.

"Anything happened?" he asked.

"No. Nothing."

"Tom act all right? No monkey tricks?"

"He was as quiet as a cow."

"I'm getting a little scared of that boy. We'll have to be careful. I don't like the idea of you feeding him when I'm away. I think I'll get Vedene to come after this."

"I don't want Vedene."

"Vedene's all right," said Goulet.

Mrs. Goulet became emphatic. "I don't want him. Tom's not dangerous. Besides, I feed him. Not Margaret."

Goulet started. "It's as dangerous for one as for the other," he remarked.

"It wouldn't matter about me," she observed acidly.

Susan's face was like a mask. Goulet wondered whether this was another of those remarks it were better to ignore. If he remonstrated there would probably be one of those outbursts he hated. She puzzled him; her sullen mood had lasted so long. He had expected her to be over it before this. Shifting uneasily in his chair, acutely conscious that he was attempting to bridge a gap that might offer unforeseen difficulties—even, perhaps, to the point of

refusing to be bridged at all—he made no reply to her remark, but sought to divert his wife's thoughts.

"This beef tastes good."

His tone indicated a refusal to enter into a discussion with her and she knew it.

"Does it?"

"You bet! I met Braithwaite in town. He's lost one of his kids. Scarlet fever. His wife's sick too. He didn't know what was the matter with her. He was in town to make arrangements about burying the kid. Tough," he added.

Mrs. Goulet looked down at him woodenly.

"I don't know."

"Don't know?" Goulet repeated, his tone asking for an explanation of her meaning.

"The kid's better dead."

Goulet dropped his eyes. Again he knew that they were on the verge of the outbreak. What could a man say that wouldn't be twisted? He went on eating in silence for a time, keenly aware of his wife standing grimly beside the stove. Why didn't she sit down! At last he had to say something; the silence tortured his nerves.

"Getting colder."

"It would be."

"I guess we'll be feeding before very long."

"I guess so."

"Oh, damn it!" he cried, breaking out at last. "What's the matter with you?"

"Matter?" she ejaculated, as if surprised. "Nothing."

"For God's sake sit down then!"

"I want to stand."

"Why?" he asked, bewildered.

"I want to be ready to wait on you," she replied quietly. He could not tell whether she was sneering or not. "That's all I'm fit for."

He dropped his knife and fork and pushed his plate away.

"Look here!" he cried in exasperation. "What's eating you?"

"Nothing." Only the brilliance of her eyes betrayed the increasing excitement within her.

Goulet regarded her helplessly. She had never been like this before. He pulled his chair closer to the stove and bent down to unlace his boots, but Susan anticipated his movement. She was before him at the laces, and their heads almost collided.

"I can do it," he objected. "I can take off my own boots," but he sat upright and yielded his foot to her. He was so utterly surprised he could not think connectedly. She had not offered to do such a thing for years, and her enigmatic humility puzzled and amazed him.

"That better?" she asked, when she had finished and his feet were in slippers.

Goulet did not know what to do except follow her lead.

"Fine," he answered.

"I'm glad you're comfortable," she said with a mocking warmth of tone. "You should be. You're white."

"Look here," he cried again, but stopped abruptly. Susan met his eyes, waited for him to continue, but nothing followed that futile explosion. She resumed her position by the stove.

After a minute or two, he asked:

"Is Margaret asleep?"

Susan knew that he was afraid that his daughter would be awake and listening; her room opened off the kitchen.

"How should I know? Shall I go and see?" she inquired as if she were a servant.

"It doesn't matter."

The parcel he had brought caught his eye. His face lighted up with pleasure. Here was something that would alter Susan pretty quick.

"Say! What d'you think of this?" he cried. "I'll bet this will make your eyes water!"

He stood up and with one of the table knives cut the string, unable now to control his impatience sufficiently to bother with knots.

Susan said nothing; did not move, and Goulet felt a premonition of failure. But how could he fail?

"Guess what it is," he cried with mock enthusiasm, and endeavouring to arouse her curiosity. He felt that she could not be so indifferent as she pretended. "You say I never think of you! You'll see! Guess what it is!"

"I can't."

He brought the parcel to the other end of the table, moving the bread out of the way, so that the contents should be quite close to her when he threw open the paper.

"Look!"

He jerked the covering open and disclosed what she knew to be a dress length of silk. By the lustre of it she knew that never such another piece had come into the house before. It had cost several dollars a yard, and Margaret possessed nothing that could compare with it for quality, but she said not a word; her expression was unfathomable to him.

"Well, what d'you think of it?" he chuckled, thinking that her surprise and pleasure made her silent. But even as he asked his question he could see that there was no pleasure in her face. He looked again at his present, almost as if he expected to see that a miraculous change had taken place in it. Something was wrong. It has failed to produce the desired effect. He unfolded the silken material, and in the fold lay a blouse, also of silk. Goulet picked the garment up and shook it out doubtfully. The blouse would be wrong too, he had no doubt. Everything was wrong. He felt old. There was no use trying. He could see by his wife's glaring eyes that she was almost boiling over. Well, let her boil!

"What's wrong with it?" he asked, all the animation gone from his manner.

He could see her lips quivering—the cataclysm was upon him now, he knew. She controlled herself, but her voice trembled.

"So that's what you think of me," she said in a low, vibrating tone. "That's what you think of me!"

Goulet dropped the blouse and seated himself with the air of a man who has given up the attempt to understand the non-understandable.

"What's wrong with it?" he asked again. "What do I think of you?"

"Would you buy that for Margaret?" she asked, but answering her own question, continued: "You think I'm an Indian, and that's why you bought it for me. Wasn't there anything else in the store with more colours in it?" she inquired with bitter sarcasm.

"So that's what wrong?" Goulet looked at the shining material lying upon the table and knew that it was not what he would have bought for his daughter. Yet he had thought that it was just the kind of thing to please Susan. It would have pleased her at one time. "I thought you'd like it," he lamely rejoined.

"You thought I'd like it! That shows what you think of me. You think I'm a squaw. That's the kind of thing the squaws like! Why didn't you buy me a red blanket so that I could go round with it over my head? Would you have bought stuff like that for your first wife? D'you think she would have liked it?"

At the mention of the woman who was dead Goulet looked up.

"Leave her out of it," he warned in a deep voice.

"Yes, leave her out of it! You think of her differently from what you've ever thought of me, don't you? I'm just a breed as your daughter said."

"Did she call you a breed?"

"She'd better not!" Susan shrilled. "She'd better not! But she called Steve a breed because he tried to kiss her the night of the fire. She said she's just as soon marry an Indian. He's not good enough for her. He's a breed like me. But I've been good enough for you all these years, although you've never looked upon me as anything but a breed, good enough to be a servant, to get your meals and wait upon you like I've done to-night. That was why I undid your boots. I'm your breed servant."

"Macdonald shouldn't have tried to kiss her," Goulet said ominously. "He'd better leave her alone."

"That gets you, don't it?" Mrs. Goulet sneered. "Leave her alone! He's just as good as anyone! But you'd rather see her dead, wouldn't you, than marry a breed? I know! I'm good enough for you, to be your servant; but a breed isn't good enough for your daughter. She's got to have a white man, hasn't she? It would drag her down to marry a breed. You thought I didn't know these things. You thought I didn't know! You thought I didn't know of the difference in the way you've thought of me and the way you think of your first wife. But she was white!" she snarled.

"Leave her out of it," ordered Goulet.

"You can't leave her out of it! She's here between us, like she's always been. D'you think I haven't seen you looking at her picture? D'you think I haven't seen the look in your eyes when you did it? I've watched you, when I was hungry for you, when I would have done anything to get you. But you've never thought of me like that! I was just a breed, a servant, a tool for you to use, to do your work and look after her child and to wait on the two of you. Just a breed, not much better than a dog!"

"I've always treated you right," Goulet said defensively. "No man could do more than that."

"D'you think I wanted to be treated right?" Susan asked. "That wasn't what I wanted. I've wanted what I've never got, and I've wanted it, and wanted it! I wanted what that first woman had, and I've known for years that I could never get it—that you thought me just a breed!"

"That's a lie!" said Goulet.

"It's not a lie! It's always been in the back of your mind though you didn't seem to know it. But I knew it. I watched you so that I knew what you were thinking, and when Margaret was growing up, I could tell the difference between the way you talked to her, and the pains you took to teach her and the way you treated me. It didn't

matter about me. I was not supposed to know anything, but she had to be taught. And now you've taught her, and she looks down on me. She never says it, but it's in her mind. Give her your dress! Give her your present! Make her look like a squaw! Oh no!" Her voice sank to a lower and more bitter note. "That would never do! I'll wear it. Let Margaret make it up for me. Then everyone'll know that Goulet's been dressing his breed wife! That he's proud of her! So proud of her!" She sank into a chair and burst into tears.

CHAPTER VIII

THE present Goulet had bought still lay upon the table, but the moonlight had robbed it of its gaudiness. It looked innocent enough now, a pattern of black and white only, though neither colour entered into its composition. Goulet had left Susan and gone to bed. Some time later Susan had followed and undressed in the dark.

The moonlight streamed through the window. Mrs. Goulet's clothes lay piled upon a chair—her stockings hung from the seat of it and the moonlight threw them into relief so that they looked like two misshapen legs.

Goulet could not sleep and knew that Susan was awake too. The room was cold, but the two lay as far apart as possible, the bedclothes drawn tightly over the mounds of their bodies, so that the chilly air entered between them.

So Macdonald had tried to kiss Margaret, Goulet thought. He might have known, foreseen that something of the kind would happen. He was glad that she had repulsed him. He could hardly admit to himself the extent of his gladness and relief. Margaret—his daughter—the wife of a breed! By God, no! To his mind there was a vast difference between a white man marrying a breed woman, and the marriage of a white woman to a man with native blood in his veins. He did not reason out the difference; the feeling was instinctive. It did not occur to him that he had degraded himself by taking Susan to wife. Yet the idea of Margaret being married to Macdonald revolted him. It was unthinkable.

Yet Susan's side of the case appealed to him. Poor Susan! It was tough on her. What she had said had been a revelation to him. Whoever would have dreamed that she brooded so much! It was as if she had dissected him;

had probed to the deep-rooted instincts he was unconscious of possessing.

And how she hated Margaret. Her insane jealousy! There was no use blinking that. Susan hated her. He knew she was going to do all she could to make the girl marry Steve. He wondered what he had better do; thought over it for a long while. There were so many things to be considered. He could prevent Macdonald coming to the house again, and refuse to allow him to take the hay he needed. That would make him a poor man. He would not be able to keep many cattle, but he would still be able to continue where he was; would not have to go away. Susan would be still more infuriated then. With Macdonald living near-by, she would never forget. There would be no end to it, no peace and quietness. And what was the use of stirring up all that trouble? If Margaret felt as she evidently did toward Steve, then there was no possible danger of her yielding to Susan; she was not the kind of girl to yield, he thought with pride. The more she was prodded the stouter would grow her resistance. But there was bound to be trouble whatever he did, whichever way he turned. The thing had gone too far now to stop. How would it all end?

From that he passed to wondering how it had all started. So much trouble growing and growing under cover. Why could not everybody see that things couldn't be altered, and make the best of them as they were? No, they had to buck against them; trying to alter things that could not be altered, destroying all comfort. It seemed a mad world, full of perplexities, peopled by the insane.

How was it all going to end? There had to be an end, yet he could not foresee it. Such a state of things could not go on indefinitely. Of course Margaret might get married and go away and then she would be out of it. This was a melancholy reflection. What would life be like when she was gone? Not much left then. What a perplexing thing life is, he thought, a coming and a going; everything altering, nothing fixed.

Yet it was only natural that the girl should get married. Some young fellow would carry her away and she would be only too glad to go. Then she would be starting over the same old road that so many had travelled. And she would think it was going to be a different road in her particular case. But it wouldn't be. Just the same old road, and as she got older she would know, as he knew now, that all roads were much the same. She would be old then, looking for peace and quietness, and probably not getting it. Why could not one stay young?

Yet he did not feel old. His interest in life was just as keen as it had ever been. He felt just as young as on the day when he pitched his tent on the spot where the barn was now standing. But he was full of hope then, pregnant with the things he was going to do. Perhaps that was the difference? That was what growing old meant—one ceased to look forward to much. One knew.

But he wasn't old. No one could call him old. He felt too alert. True, men he had known had grown old. They were somewhere about his own age, but they had lived very differently. They had not taken care of themselves. Some were dead. Oh, well, he needn't think about dying just yet. He determined to look at himself carefully in the glass to-morrow; see whether he looked old or not. No need to think about dying yet though. Not a strong, healthy man like him.

But the trend of thought once started would not be banished. One could never tell—anyone could die. The strong and well the same as the sick and weak—the young as well as the old. Anyone could die, in a few hours—not even that sometimes. If he were to be blown out like that what would happen? A hell of a mess with things as they were. He would have to do something about it. Ought to make a will. He hated to think of doing that; it was like ordering a coffin. Still, it should be done. He would have to see about it. Anyway, Margaret might marry, then she would be all right. But supposing she didn't! Another perplexing problem. What was the use of a will?

The ranch couldn't be divided very well, and there was practically no money. Just a few hundred dollars. Not much to show for all the work, almost a life-time of it, and the pinching and scraping. Well, it was more than most had; far more. And he had security too. No danger of him losing what he had. But this kind of thinking didn't get anywhere. He jerked his mind back.

Supposing Margaret didn't get married and he were to die, what was going to happen? That was the problem to be solved. Susan would have to live and Margaret would have to live, and they wouldn't be able to live together. There was only one way out. The ranch would have to be divided. He would have to hire a surveyor and get a line run so that the hay-land would be divided equally, and both of them be able to get to the creek. Then there would have to be another house built, a barn and other buildings. He would have to see about it. One ought to have as much as the other. And he wanted to be square with Susan. She had been a good wife. What would he have done without her? But she ought not to have gone on like that about the present. It had cost him thirty-seven dollars and eighty-five cents, only they knocked the five cents off. A lot of money to throw away. No use now. And he had thought he was doing just the right thing. No use howling about it though, just another of those things that have gone wrong.

But the will and the surveyor? He would have to see about them the next time he went to town. It was going to cost a lot of money. How much? he wondered with the apprehension of the man to whom money has not come easily—those fellows charged like the mischief. Then there were all the buildings to start. It would have to be done. He would have to work hard. The amount of it seemed stupendous to him. A hell of a lot of work!

And when it was all done, what then? Supposing he did die? Susan would want to stay here—women didn't like changing. They were like cats, they liked to stay in in the house they were used to. Margaret would have to

go to the new one. What then? What was she going to do? She would have to have a man to do the work and most of them were no good. She might be able to get another like Vedene. Vedene! Now he was all right. Susan wouldn't have him, and he would be glad to work for Margaret, and she would be all right so long as he stayed with her.

He saw himself going back to the wagon after burying his first wife and seeing Margaret riding upon the cripple's shoulders. She liked him then, had always liked him, and he knew that Vedene would do anything for her. "Pretty lucky," he thought. "Not many like Vedene now."

Goulet felt very cold down the side next to Susan. What fools they were to make themselves miserable like this. Lying apart after all these years and feeling wretched. She must be cold too. What had happened to her? Fancy flaring up like that all of a sudden! And how long was she going to keep it up? It wouldn't last, it was too wretched. She was not altogether to blame either. Perhaps he could have treated her differently. He knew that she was still awake. Perhaps they could make it up now. They would have to be sensible some time. He moved a little toward her. The creaking of the springs shattered the silence. No one would have imagined that so slight a movement would have produced so loud a noise. He moved again, holding his breath, like a man embarking upon a perilous adventure.

Susan stirred. She was aware of what he was doing, and moved away the fraction of an inch. Well, if that was the way she felt, it would have to go on for a while; the next advance would have to come from her, and he resigned himself to the coldness, baffled. Gradually he dozed. It was not a sound sleep; he was troubled by dreams; kept waking and dozing, so that he hardly knew whether he slept at all.

Suddenly he realized that Susan was gone; the clothes dropped closely upon him. His brain functioned slowly,

hovering on the border-line between sleep and wakefulness, but he began to wonder where Susan was; what she was up to. He did not arouse sufficiently to move; had only a dull curiosity. His eyes searched the room without imposing upon him the necessity of moving his head, and he saw Susan, a shadowy, white figure in her long night-dress, standing before the bureau. She was doing something, though he could not see what; searching in one of the drawers. The rays of the moon entered at a different angle now; the room was better lighted, and he could see his overalls hanging over the rail at the foot of the bed; they partially hid Susan from him. He had an impulse to ask what it was she was looking for. She must be cold, clothed only in her night-dress; would be sick—more trouble then. But he decided against speaking. Susan would only snap him up and start all over again.

But what was she doing! She couldn't find what it was she wanted anyway. Yes she could. She had found it because she was closing the drawer. Now she would be coming into bed, all cold, and a premonitory shiver ran through him. Why wouldn't she be sensible and drop all this nonsense?

Susan did not come back to bed. There was something stealthy in her movements, he thought. What was she up to? Creeping like that! Not making a sound. Her shapeless garment made her look like a ghost. She crossed the path of moonlight, for an instant she was all silvered, then she was at the foot of the bed, had taken his overalls from the rail. What did she want with them?

A moment afterward Goulet knew that Susan was searching for matches; heard the rattle as she took the box from his pocket. Matches! What did she want with matches? She returned to the bureau, back into the deeper shadow, turned her head and looked at him furtively over her shoulder. So she thought he was still asleep; didn't wish him to see what she did. Well, he didn't want to know, and closed his eyes.

A match was scratched as softly as possible, and Goulet sensed the flicker of a flame through his closed eyelids, but mastered the impulse to open his eyes. If she didn't want him to see, he didn't want to look. Then the flame grew stronger. The sensation of a ruddy light, fast growing thrust itself upon his eyes. He opened them. There was a smell of burning. What now! His wife was holding a card in her hand and it was well alight and burning brightly. Already it was more than half consumed. A card! Susan held it between her fingers and turned it so that the flame was well fed. Her face was between him and the flame so that he could see her profile. She was grinning. A card?

There are cries that leave a greater impression of agony upon the mind than a moan. Such a cry Goulet gave as he leaped from the bed. It was not a word, nothing but a guttural noise in his throat, as though his heart were stabbed. His leap carried him to his wife's side. He seized the hand that held the burning card, tore the blazing fragment from her fingers, paralysed in his grip; then flung her from him with passionate, but unconscious strength. She almost left the floor, tried to recover her balance, but overcome by her momentum, fell against the wall with a dull thud, and lay there oblivious to her pain, ingrossed in watching the effect of what she had done.

The flame was extinguished, the room unlighted except for the moonlight which fell upon Mrs. Goulet's face. Her husband uttered not a sound; stood motionless, like a statue, his tall figure seeming taller than ever in his grey night-shirt. Then he went to the window where the moonlight allowed him to examine the fragment of card-board in his fingers; all that was left of the only portrait he had ever possessed of his first wife. The scrap was black, all that had made it precious to him was burned. His lips moved, and a sound of pain issued from them. He turned and looked at his wife; stood staring at her as if he saw her for the first time, as if he were held in the grip of a spell. Her eyes in the moonlight glittered evilly.

She smiled at him without fear, maliciously and triumphantly

"That got you," she derided. "You know now the way you've thought of her all these years."

Her husband did not answer, but slowly moved toward her with his heavy hands partly raised, his fingers outstretched and moving as if hungry for a grip. He seemed to slide over the floor like a shadow. Susan knew that this was the end, that Goulet was going to kill her, but she was not afraid. She had no fear of death, only a mad desire to gloat over her triumph to the uttermost.

"That got you!" she said again in a tense whisper as he sank to his knees beside her.

Still he did not speak; did not hear her.

"Kill me!" she hissed. "They'll hang you then, and we'll go together!"

"Father!" called Margaret. "Father! What was that?"

For a moment Goulet did not move. The voice penetrated the seething confusion of his brain but could not break the spell that was upon him.

"Father! What was that noise?" A dazed expression came into Goulet's eyes; his fingers relaxed about Susan's throat and her head fell against the wall with a sharp crack. He looked at her in stupefaction. What was he doing? Susan opened her eyes, and her hand went to her throat.

"Father! Father! What has happened?"

Mechanically Goulet answered:

"Nothing! Be quiet!"

With sudden fear he wondered if Margaret would come in, but the door did not open.

Susan moved and he looked down at her as if wondering at his being there. She was grinning at him defiantly.

"My God!" he exclaimed, realizing what he had been about to do. He stood up, swaying almost as if he were going to fall, but recovering, staggered to the bed, flung himself into it, and pulled the clothes around him mechanically.

After a long while Susan stirred. She was stiff and cold. Like a fire that has burnt itself out, her mood was black now. Somehow her triumph had gone wrong. When the idea of burning the photograph had occurred to her she had imagined keeping the knowledge of it to herself for weeks, perhaps for months—there was going to be a long anticipation of her husband's misery. Now it was all over and done with—and he had gone back to bed! There seemed to be something uncanny about it to her. Again he had established his superiority, this time more surely than ever.

She crept back to bed, lay there waiting for her husband to move—it did not seem long since he had stood over her. She waited in vain. Surely he had not gone to sleep? She listened to his breathing—it was deep and regular, and now and again it quivered as if he sighed. He had fallen asleep in a few minutes, so utterly wearied, so abandoned to the exhaustion that had followed upon his intense excitement, that his mind had become blank almost instantly. His calm repose seemed insulting and contemptuous to Susan.

She lay thinking for hours. So that was all she had done after all! To-morrow he would suffer, but not for her to see; she knew him too well for that. He would hide it, and she would have to guess how his thoughts rankled. If he had struck her, if he had gone mad in his rage, she would have been paid. But not now—not by this contempt which made her feel small, too puny for him to crush. She remembered his expression when Margaret called. The surprise and horror that he had sunk even so far.

Yet he had flung her—had hurt her—had had it in his mind to kill her! Why did he do that if she was so far below him? She became the injured party. He had no right to throw her down, and he had meant to kill her. He'd better look out or she would kill him!

The thought was grimly alluring—enthralled her. She began to count the advantages that would accrue to her if

Goulet were dead. The ranch would be hers, and the cattle. Steve would be safe. It would be a real triumph. Margaret would have to marry the breed then! She could make her. She would be in Goulet's place. The thought uplifted her.

She stared into the darkness with wide, unblinking eyes. Her thoughts fascinated her; carried her on. She began to shape the matter in her mind.

CHAPTER IX

IN such a household as that of the Goulets a lack of harmony is evidenced by all too frequent periods of silence. The effort to ignore the situation succeeds only in making it more apparent.

Mrs. Goulet wore her wonted mask of frigid calm. Her expression might be described as wooden. She betrayed no outward signs of the hectic night, and her manner proclaimed that if anything was wrong she could not be blamed for it.

Goulet himself bore unmistakable signs of the storm through which he had passed. At the breakfast table he apparently forgot his porridge after eating a little. He remained quiet so long, that the fact that something was wrong began to force itself to the front. It would not be hidden.

"Father! Why don't you eat your porridge? It'll be cold!"

Goulet aroused himself with a palpable effort; looked at Margaret, then at his porridge as if seeking an explanation of its presence. "Ha!" he exclaimed, then obviously pulled himself together.

Margaret wondered what it was that Susan waited up to tell him.

The breakfast came to an end, and Goulet lighted his pipe and started out. He went without his coat and Susan very thoughtfully called him back for it, and held it up so that it would be easier for him to insert his arms in the sleeves. The look he gave his wife was not lost on Margaret. It was a peculiar, questioning look, keen as a razor. He seemed to hesitate, as if he were going to refuse

to take the coat from her, then thrust his arms into the sleeves hurriedly, as if coming to a sudden decision.

It was an extraordinarily fine morning for the time of the year. Goulet strolled through the sunlight in the direction of the barn. He had gone only a little way, however, when he fell into a droop-shouldered attitude. He appeared very old to Margaret as she stood staring after him.

The clash of dishes behind her caused her to turn with a start. Susan was gathering the breakfast dishes.

"Are you going to stand there all day doing nothing but stare out of the door?"

"I'm sorry! I was just thinking," Margaret explained.

"You think too much," retorted Susan, flouncing about the kitchen. "I'll sweep up. You can wash the breakfast things."

Margaret poured the kettle of hot water over the dishes as they lay piled in the pan. Susan went into the bedroom and left the door open. The window was up, and a current of air circulating between the two rooms caught up a flake of charred card and carried it from the bedroom into the kitchen. Another followed it, and then some smaller pieces were blown around the floor.

Margaret picked up one of the larger fragments, and there was enough of the fragile, wrinkled card to allow her to see that it was part of a photograph. She had an impulse to ask Susan what had been burned, but thought better of it. Mrs. Goulet had given no evidence of an amiable mood, and it was not likely that she would welcome questions.

When Margaret had finished her usual work she went out to look for her father. First she went to the barn but he was not there, the milk cows and the horses had been turned into the corral. She thought that perhaps her father was in the box-stall attending to Tom, the stallion; opened the door and looked in, but Goulet was not there. Wondering where he was, she left the barn and wandered idly in the direction of the bridge, and when

she reached it, leaned upon the rail for a few minutes. From where she stood she could see all over the ranch with the exception of the hay-meadows which were hidden from her view by the brow of the hill. Perhaps he was down there looking at the stacks or examining the fences, she thought. If a pole had been blown down and the cattle once got at the hay there would be no keeping them out.

On reaching the brow of the hill she saw her father—in the distance he looked like a black speck. She sat down on the grass to wait.

His actions were peculiar, she thought. He was apparently not interested in the fences that protected the stacks; did not look at them. When she first saw him he was standing on the edge of the creek that ran through the meadows, his back toward it, and Margaret could see that he was looking around him as if undecided what to do next. At last he appeared to fix his eyes upon the hill somewhere near where his daughter sat and marched toward it with long, steady strides as if measuring the land. Twice he turned back and began again, but each time from a different point. Margaret thought his behaviour extraordinary; waved her hand to him, but he did not heed her.

At last he reached the foot of the hill almost directly below Margaret, and came steadily up the slope. He was so engrossed that he did not once look up, although he turned his head from left to right occasionally as if measuring his distance from imaginary boundaries.

"What are you doing? What are you running the line for?" Margaret asked, when he was almost upon her.

Goulet looked up with a start. There was something in his attitude that suggested a boy who has been caught at a naughty trick. For an instant he was quite confused. His mind had been so concentrated upon what he was doing, he had so little expected interruption, that he was at a loss what to say.

Instinctively he sparred for time.

"Eh?" he gasped. "What's that you said?"

"You looked as if you were running a line. What are you doing? Going to sell?"

"Well," he said defensively, still seeking time to collect himself, "what if I am?"

"But you don't want to sell any land, do you? What do you want to sell for?"

"Who said I was going to sell?" he inquired, somewhat impatiently. "You're the first one that has said anything about selling."

"I didn't think of it till I saw what you were doing."

Goulet sank to the ground beside his daughter and looked away. His manner confirmed her opinion that he was doing as she had said, and she felt surrounded by mystery. What was going to happen now?

Goulet had no idea what to say. He had prepared no tale to account for his actions, and to admit that he was running a line would be to get himself involved in all manner of inconvenient and exceedingly distasteful explanations. Yet he knew that to the eye of the experienced observer it was quite evident what he had been doing. After reaching this conclusion he came to a rapid decision. Margaret was old enough now to face the facts in the situation that had developed. It was useless to pretend to her that things were as they had been. She knew they were not.

"I was running a line," he admitted.

Margaret could tell from the alteration in his manner that there was going to be no concealment between them. She asked:

"Why?"

"I was thinking of making a will; dividing up the land, and giving half of it to you, and half of it to mother."

The girl looked at him with round, wide eyes. To her the word "will" was synonymous with "death." Her expression told Goulet something of what was passing in her mind. He reached out and took her hand.

"You needn't be scared," he said. "I'm not going to die. You don't think I'm so old yet, do you? I'm good

for a long while. I'm not figuring on dying." His tone was quite confident and reassuring. "Yet," he added, "a man ought to take no chances. He ought to try and fix things so that if anything does happen, everything's all right as far as he can make them."

But these considerations did not weigh with his daughter. They appeared to her quite inconsequential beside the fact that they suggested the possibility of his dying. In a brief, terrifying flash she saw herself left with her step-mother. She realized that her father must, in the natural course of things, some day die. But that unimaginable event was to happen in the vague, dim and distant, and therefore, comfortable future—it had not demanded immediate consideration. This talk of dividing the land, and above all, the nature of the word "will," seemed to bring his dying close.

Illogically she said in an awed and frightened tone:

"Don't do it!"

Goulet laughed quietly, partly to hide his discomfiture at the pain he was causing her. But now that he had started on the task he did not hesitate to enlighten her fully. One cannot escape the facts of life by shutting one's eyes to them, he thought.

"That'll hardly do," he answered in a low voice.

Margaret herself perceived the folly of her remark.

"I suppose not," she agreed. "But why divide the land?"

Goulet became embarrassed. He hesitated for a moment at the idea of mentioning Susan, but they had to go on to the end now.

"You and mother aren't getting on very well together," he said. "She seems to have turned against you. If you were alone it might be pretty hard for you to stand—for both you and her," he added quickly, but Margaret understood that he referred to her only.

"It's because of Steve," she told him.

"Yes, Steve. That's it. You don't like him?"

"No."

"Is it because he's a breed?"

"I don't know. I don't like him."

"I'm glad of that. I wouldn't like to think of you marrying him." He added as if in explanation of what he himself had done: "It's different with a woman." The explanation was not a very clear one, but Margaret understood what he meant.

"I'll never marry him," she declared. "Never!"

"I'll tell him he'd better leave you alone," said Goulet, his voice hardening.

But that frightened Margaret. She knew Macdonald would tell Susan immediately, that then there would be more trouble.

"No," she cried, "don't. He'll only make me like him less and less—and"—here she thought of the night of the fire and could not make her tone as confident as she wished.—"I can look after myself."

"Oh, well," her father agreed, "I guess we've enough to think of without troubling ourselves about him. He'll soon get tired." Goulet was glad enough to escape the task of talking to Macdonald.

"I'm planning to build a house and a barn this side of the creek," he continued. "I'll run a line right across the creek and across the meadows. That'll give you both hay, and you'll both be able to get at the creek for water. I'm fixing it to leave the cattle between you. Half to her and half to you. I'll see young Braithwaite about fixing it all up right when I go to town. The line'll have to be properly run so that there'll be no chance of kicks afterwards. I'll have to get a surveyor for that."

This was all stupefying to Margaret. She looked at him with something approaching alarm.

"What has happened?" she gasped. "Do you know you're going to die? You're not keeping something hidden from me?"

"I'm hiding nothing," he declared. "I'm just fixing so that if I should die both you and Susan'll be all right and there won't be anything for you to quarrel about."

"But it seems so cold-blooded; planning it all out like this! You're not going to die for years and years." She could not imagine a world without her father. She could just as easily have imagined the lake disappearing, or the Saskatchewan river drying up or running pure gold.

Goulet put an arm around her shoulders. It was very cheering to feel that he was valuable to someone.

"It may not be for years; but it's coming some time. Perhaps, long before that, you'll be married and away. Surely there's someone you like?"

Her head was against his shoulder, and he could feel a movement of negation.

"No," she replied. "There isn't anyone, and I don't want anyone. I only want you!"

"There's quite a few nice young fellows in town," he said in a lighter tone, "and more settlers coming in; mostly batchelors. You won't die an old maid!"

The girl detected beneath his bantering tone more than a hint of anxiety.

"Do you want me to go then?" she asked. There was so much awry with her little world all of a sudden, so many unexpected things had happened, so many cross currents had made themselves evident that she was prepared for almost anything. "I'll do what you want me to," she said simply.

Her father drew her closer to him.

"Do I want you to go!" he exclaimed. "I'd like to keep you always! I'd like to think I was always going to have you!" A quieter and a heavier note came into his voice. "But it isn't possible," he added. "We can't always do the things we want."

"But it's years away," she insisted. "Years and years. You're quite young yet. Why must you do all this now? There's lots of time. And there's no young man I want to run away with."

"He'll come some day," he said, and in answer to her shaking head: "But he will. And you'll go away and think mighty little of the going."

Again she shook her head.

"But you will," he insisted. "Most of us have done that, and would do it again if we had to start all over. That's life. And if you've got to go, I'd like to see you fixed up before—before——"

"But you're not going to," she interrupted impatiently. "You keep thinking about it!"

"I'd like to know you were quite safe. A girl is different from a man. He can go anywhere, do anything, and he's all right. But a girl with nobody has a pretty rough time."

But the world held no terrors for Margaret. It was a ball waiting at her feet to be played with. She humoured her father, however.

"I would have Francet," she said playfully.

"Ha!" exclaimed Goulet. "You don't want to forget that! If no young man has carried you off, you can always hire Vedene to work for you. He'll do what's right by you. You'll always be able to trust him." Goulet stood up and straightened his cramped limbs.

"Let's go home," he said. "It's getting near noon. Mother'll have dinner ready. I brought out some tobacco for Francet yesterday. You can take it up after dinner if there's nothing else you want to do, and you can tell him to come to work to-morrow morning. I want him."

The talk had not affected Margaret's appetite. Wills, and lawyers and surveyors, while having a momentary dampening effect upon her spirits, had failed to impair her digestion. As she walked home she thought of what her father had said. The precautions he proposed seemed far-fetched and unnecessary. Her father was going to die, but not now. As for getting married, she did not think about that at all. She didn't want to get married, could not imagine any man arousing tempestuous emotions in her breast, and decided that her father had what she called "the blues." Her step-mother had the blues also. Both of them would certainly get over them and then everything would go on as before. Steve would get tired of bothering her, and her step-mother tire of pointing

out his advantages as a husband. Everybody got tired sooner or later, and gave up when they saw that keeping on was of no avail. Just now she was conscious of being hungry; breakfast had not been a success.

Susan was sitting at the table, finishing her noon-day meal. Her plate and cup and saucer were still before her on the table.

"Why, are we late?" asked Margaret in surprise.

After Margaret had gone out to seek her father Mrs. Goulet had started to think and had arrived at the conclusion that she had made a mistake in helping her husband on with his coat. He might harbour the delusion that she was trying to get back into his good graces. The idea that he might have misinterpreted her action made her very cross with herself, and she had determined that if he entertained that idea the sooner it was driven out of his mind the better. Therefore she replied icily to Margaret's question:

"I don't know whether you're late or not. If you want to eat you can do your own cooking!"

CHAPTER X

It was a pleasant fall afternoon, so pleasant that it seemed hardly possible that to-morrow might bring below zero weather; the air was sharp and bracing, yet the sun was warm. But Margaret did not think about the weather, her mind being fully occupied by sorrowful reflections over the melancholy state of affairs at home.

As she drew near Vedene's shack, the sound of his voice came to her. He was singing one of those sentimental and pathetic ballads of pure but unrequited love that appeal to the unsophisticated mind.

"It's a long time now I've been waiting
For the words that you never will say.
Remember the Red River Valley,
And the half-breed that loved you so true."

Francet was mending his corral and a wagon loaded with ten-foot poles stood near at hand. Margaret was quite close before he noticed her. His sight was so poor that objects were invisible to him at a greater distance than fifty or sixty yards.

"Margy!" he exclaimed. Then: "Hallo, Margy. What are you doing here?"

She did not answer his question.

"I didn't know you could sing like that, Francet," she said. "You don't know how nice it was!"

A deep brick-red suffused his neck and face.

"That!" he exclaimed. "You don't call that singing, do you?"

"But I do! You'll have to sing to us down at the house just as you were singing then."

"Well, don't I?" he demanded. "You've heard me sing hundreds of times before. What have you gone crazy about it now for?"

"You've never sung like that! Never!"

"Aw, shucks!"

"You'll sing to me again some time, just like that; won't you, Francet?"

"But you'll be looking at me!"

She shook her head earnestly. "I won't look at you, Francet. We'll go away somewhere. You can get on one side of a bluff and I'll get on the other. Then you'll be sure I'm not looking at you, and you'll be able to do it."

"I dunno," he replied, very dubiously. "I'd be thinking of you listening all the time. It wouldn't work."

"Just forget me," she suggested. "Think hard of what you're singing."

But Francet would have nothing to do with the scheme.

"It ain't no blame good," summed up his opinion.

"I've brought you some plugs of tobacco, and father wants you to come down and start work to-morrow."

"Work! What work?"

"He's going to get out logs."

"Logs! What's he going to get logs out for?"

"To build a house and a stable."

"What for?"

"Something has happened at home, something between father and mother. This morning I saw him pacing off the land. He's going to make a will and leave half the land to me and half to mother. He's going to put up a house and buildings on my half so that I'll have a place of my own."

"Umph!" exclaimed Vedene, getting up from the pile of poles where he had been sitting beside Margaret and pacing up and down. He looked almost grotesque as he shambled to and fro; his head hanging forward, a hank of grey hair straggling over his forehead, and his weak eyes blinking quickly in his lined, thin face. The sagging loose overalls seemed to accentuate the hump between his shoulders.

"Umph!" he ejaculated again. "And what does mother think about it?"

"I don't know whether she knows about—about dividing everything."

"Umph!" repeated Francet. Then he remarked dryly: "I guess you'll know all about it when she does know."

"She may know now. She wouldn't cook any dinner."

Francet laughed at that. The idea seemed humorous to him.

"Hasn't she said anything to you about the place being divided?"

"No."

"Then she doesn't know, I guess, or she'd have had something to say. I guess your father's going to tell her this afternoon. That's why he sent you up here. I'll bet there's hell a-popping back there when he puts her wise." Francet walked up and down rapidly. "Umph!" he ejaculated again presently. "I'll bet there's hell a-popping!"

CHAPTER XI

WHEN Goulet told his wife what he intended doing with the farm and stock Susan could hardly credit her senses—she had not thought of anything like that happening, and the longer she thought, the less resigned she became. She boiled. This was the last straw! The plan to poison her husband, formed in her mind on the night she burned the photograph, cried out for execution.

A few days afterwards Susan entered upon a campaign of pie-making. She made pies nearly every day. At one time when Mrs. Goulet made pies it was an indication that she was in a particularly amiable mood; but the indications were all awry at present, for her mood was not amiable, decidedly the reverse. She was in a black and a fearful mood, and she made pies with a vindictive energy and filled them as if she were filling them from the abundant hate that possessed her.

Strychnine was the only poison with which she was familiar as it was used each spring to poison gophers. There was a quantity—almost half an ounce—in the house now. Mrs. Goulet was afraid to use that as someone might have noticed the amount left in the bottle.

Susan knew that Steve had strychnine also. A little taken from his bottle would never be noticed, particularly by such a man as her brother, who was notoriously careless in his household arrangements.

At first Steve was astonished at his sister's kindness and generosity in bringing him pies so often. He suspected that she had a favour to ask in return, and wondered what it could be, and was vaguely uncomfortable. But the days went on and Susan demanded nothing, whereat Stephen was completely mystified. All that had prevented his

bottle of strychnine from being tampered with, however, was a lack of opportunity. The one favour that Mrs. Goulet desired, and for which she could not ask, was that her brother leave her alone for a few minutes on one of her visits, or be absent when she called.

Goulet spoke of going to town as soon as snow fell. There were a number of things required for the new house and Mrs. Goulet knew that he would see a lawyer and probably make a will at the same time. What she had to do had to be done before then, it would be useless afterward. She watched the sky for indications of a change in the weather in sweating anxiety. Goulet and Vedene were hauling logs for the new house across the creek, and from one of the kitchen windows Susan could see the pile growing, and cursed at the fate that denied her the opportunity of carrying out her purpose.

Then at last the weather changed. One morning the sky was heavy and overcast, threatening snow. Winter was coming at last. Mrs. Goulet was in agony all night. If snow fell she knew that her husband would go to town, and would then see the lawyer. She would be too late. Twice she left her bed and went to the window, but the ground was still clear.

To-morrow she would get the strychnine, she determined. To-morrow! On how many nights had she resolved to steal the poison to-morrow. She thought of the house going up across the creek. As long as she lived she would see it, unless she could stop Goulet from seeing the lawyer. Margaret would be able to laugh at her and Goulet would have triumphed. To-morrow! As she goaded herself, to-morrow seemed years and years away, yet came with fearful rapidity.

Mrs. Goulet had been in the habit of visiting her brother in the afternoon and was afraid to change her routine now. She felt as if a fever was upon her. The presence of Margaret tormented her; she could not help fancying that she was being watched, and try as she would, could not keep her nervousness under control. When Margaret

sat down near the table where her step-mother was working to peel a pan of potatoes, the girl's presence was more than Mrs. Goulet could endure.

"How's the building going on," she asked.

"Pretty good!" Margaret responded, astonished at her step-mother's sudden interest. "They started on the foundations this morning, but they won't get it done this winter."

"I guess not," said Mrs. Goulet grimly. Then it occurred to her that her words were too bold. The girl might think of them afterwards. "Why don't you think they will?" she asked, astonished at her own cleverness.

"They won't be able to do much after snow comes."

"No, they won't," agreed Mrs. Goulet. "And it's getting colder all the time. Look in the bedroom for your father's mitts. It must be cold working without them. You might take them to him."

Margaret wondered at this sudden solicitude for her father after all that had happened. Her eyes expressed surprise, and Mrs. Goulet was in an agony of fear that she had gone too far again.

"He can't use mitts while he's building," said Margaret.

"No, of course he can't," Mrs. Goulet stammered. "It don't matter. Don't bother."

"Oh, I'll take them," Margaret said, eager to meet her step-mother more than half-way, and convinced that everything was going to come right after all. There was no need of all this talk of wills, and all this work of building. Look at the way mother had changed already!

After the mid-day meal Mrs. Goulet left for her visit to Macdonald, leaving Margaret to clear away and wash the dishes. The day was very dark and the wind came in sudden, fierce gusts. The centre of the lake was still free from ice and the water was whipped into white crests. Heavy masses of cloud, weighed with snow, rolled ponderously from the north. Occasionally ducks went hurtling through the air, their short wings flapping frantically in their headlong flight. One could imagine that they had

delayed their departure overlong and were now trying to make up for their tardiness. Once a flock of geese sailed high overhead, their wedge-shaped formation varying not an inch. Leisurely as their flight appeared, they vanished into space in a few minutes.

Mrs. Goulet hoped against hope, as she had hoped on each of her former visits, that her brother would be out. Surely, she thought, fate would be with her for once. Her expression was not pleasant, therefore, when she opened the shack door and was met by a combination of heated air and tobacco smoke.

"Hallo, Susan!" Macdonald greeted her. "You'd a pretty rough trip, hadn't you?" There was a smirk on his face as he said this that irritated her. It seemed to say: "You are a fool to come on a day like this!"

"You needn't grin!" she retorted. "I'm not as soft as you. It won't hurt me."

"Don't get sore at me," he grumbled. "I didn't ask you to come. I guess you're doing it for your own pleasure—not mine."

Mrs. Goulet paused for an instant at that. She was in the act of hanging her coat over her brother's upon the door.

"What are you driving at now!" she asked after a moment's reflection.

"You've got a face like a wet day," was Stephen's rejoinder. "If you're fed up with that bunch at the house, you needn't try to take it out on me. I ain't done nothing to you."

Mrs. Goulet pulled the vacant chair from beneath the table. It had a broken back and was a most uncomfortable chair, but she drew it close to the stove and extended her hands to the heat.

Macdonald watched her through a haze of smoke. That she was harassed and restless was evident to him, and he could not resist the temptation to enjoy a gibe at her expense.

"How's the new house going on?" he asked,

Mrs. Goulet was not the woman to take a thrust like that meekly, and her eyes flashed.

"Don't you think you can play with me!" she snapped. "If you were not the white-livered dog you are it wouldn't be built."

Macdonald immediately regretted his taunt.

"Here, go easy!" he begged. "What could I do. What the hell d'you expect me to do?"

"Nothing!" she flung at him, venting her anger and disappointment upon him because he was not out when she called. "All you're fit for is to stick around the house all the time and wait for things to be done for you. If there'd been anything in you," she went on with increasing vehemence, "you'd have had that girl by this time, and there'd have been no house and you wouldn't be the beggar you are!"

Macdonald removed his feet from the table. The situation called for delicate handling.

"You needn't work yourself up. I couldn't do more than I have," he protested. "She won't have me, that's all."

Mrs. Goulet laughed at him. "So she won't have you, won't she? And did she frighten you? Well, well!" Then with a bite in her tone: "She would scare a thing like you!"

Stephen liked not her words: her vituperation nettled him considerably; but to use his own expression: "She had him where the hair was short."

"What can I do?" he asked.

Mrs. Goulet did not answer him directly, but continued:

"I wish I was a man! I'd show her! I'd fix her!"

"Well, if you've got a scheme let's have it," said Macdonald. "If you've got anything fresh, fetch it out and we'll look it over."

But Mrs. Goulet did not disclose her scheme. She had cooled down and her mind had returned to the purpose of her visit. Her gaze wandered to the soap-box that Macdonald used as a cupboard. It was nailed to the wall of the shack, three or four feet above the floor to render it

less easy of access to marauding mice. Mrs. Goulet knew that the bottle containing the strychnine was in the cupboard, but from her present position could not see it, and wondered if her brother had moved it. That was just the kind of thing he would do, she reflected with bitter contempt.

She went to the door, fumbled in her coat for a moment, as if looking for something, then turned. She could now see inside the cupboard, see that the poison was still there; the label on the bottle seemed to challenge her—the word "poison" to flame in big, red letters.

"What are you rubbering at?" Steve asked, twisting in his chair and staring at the cupboard too.

Mrs. Goulet cursed herself for a fool. Why had she stood there like that? She returned to her chair and sat down, her brother regarding her curiously. She forced a laugh.

"I thought I saw a mouse in your cupboard," she said.

"Maybe you did," Stephen replied. "They're always in there. I wondered what it was you were looking at. Thought you were looking at something."

"Wasn't it something?" she demanded, her tone sharp and biting. The sight of him smoking his pipe, with not a thing in the world to trouble him, maddened her. She envied him his peace of mind, yet hated him for possessing it. She wondered how she was going to get him out of the house—he would have to go somehow, and her eyes, eager and keen, despite her efforts to appear unconcerned, wandered around the shack in search of an inspiration, but none came to her.

"Listen to that wind," Macdonald remarked. "Curse it! I'll bet we'll be feeding in less than a couple of days! It'll snow to-night or to-morrow."

Mrs. Goulet stood up, aghast at the thought. Snow to-night or to-morrow? She had known it, but that another should confirm her opinion was unbearable. She felt as though she were on fire. Hate flamed in her eyes

when she looked at her brother because he would not leave her.

Unable to remain seated Mrs. Goulet began to pace up and down the narrow passage between the bed and the table, which she was unable to circle while her brother sat beside the stove. Each time she faced toward it, her eyes sought the bottle in the cupboard. Its attraction was irresistible.

"What's got into you?" Stephen asked fretfully. "Walking up and down that way. Gosh! I'd a thought you'd a wanted to sit still awhile after walking here!"

"Mind your own business," she snapped. "I'll walk if I want to!"

Macdonald settled himself more comfortably in his chair. "All right. Go to it! Walk your blamed legs off if you like!"

But Mrs. Goulet suddenly lost her enthusiasm for exercise; the clock warned her that she would soon have to go. That she should be thwarted again made her desperate. Macdonald's head was only a few inches from her, and she felt an almost uncontrollable urge to beat his skull with her bare hands.

"Ain't you got a thing to do outside?" she asked in a strained voice. "Are you all ready for the snow? I don't know how you can sit and sit in that chair."

"I'm fixed all right. And what are you so blamed anxious to get me out for? I'll have all I want of it before the winter's over."

Mrs. Goulet saw that she had gone too far, but was too exasperated to control herself.

"I ain't anxious! I don't care if you take root. Take root in your chair!" she cried in a shrill voice. "And then you'll whine about men like Goulet getting ahead of you. You're like all the breeds. You work only when you're driven to it. You'll let everything slide till it falls on top of you and has to be done! You're no good!" she cried. "No good!" Unconsciously her head turned toward the cupboard and her eyes fell on the bottle. For

a moment she had an impulse to walk straight to it and take it from its resting place. The bottle seemed to taunt her, and her brother's back was turned. She had only to step directly to the cupboard without attempting to be silent, walk just as she had been walking a few minutes before—Steve would not turn his head now, he was too used to her restless pacing.

She found herself approaching the cupboard; was there, put out her hand and touched the bottle, which clinked against something. She snatched her fingers away as if the bottle were red hot, and for an instant her heart seemed to stop beating.

Stephen turned his head. "Is that that blamed mouse?" he inquired languidly. Then he saw the expression on his sister's face. "What are you up to?" he asked, his words more complaint than question.

For a moment she stood silent, dumbfounded at the trap she had fallen into. Then a sudden inspiration came to her.

"I want a drink. I was seeing if there was a cup in there."

"What d'you want a cup for? They're all dirty. The dipper's in the pail."

Mrs. Goulet was not thirsty but she had to drink now. The pail stood on a box against the wall just behind the door. She went to it intending to wet her lips only, but as she raised the dipper she had another inspiration.

"This water's warm," she complained. "I don't want warm water. Get some fresh."

But even now Macdonald threatened to defeat her purpose.

"That's all right," he protested. "It ain't been there more than a coupla hours; not that. It's wet anyway."

Infuriated, Mrs. Goulet almost screamed: "I ain't going to drink it. Go out and get some fresh."

"Get it yourself," Macdonald replied surlily. "It won't hurt you to get it if you want it so bad."

For a moment Mrs. Goulet stood nonplussed, choking in her rage. She seized the pail violently as if intending

to take it up. There was a clatter, and a wave of water soused Macdonald's feet.

With an oath he leaped up.

"You've done something now!" he yelled. "Damn it! Why did you have to go monkeying with that pail?" His first thought was of the work entailed in drying the floor. "It's all got to be wiped up," he snarled. "Why the hell didn't you leave the pail alone!"

But Mrs. Goulet was unabashed. "You should have done what I wanted and then it wouldn't have happened. Where's a cloth? I'll wipe it up. You go and get some more water."

This suggestion met with her brother's approval. It was less disagreeable to get another pail of water than to dry the floor. He found a piece of rag and gave it to her, then put on his coat.

"By God!" he exclaimed as he opened the door, "I wish you'd kept your pie to-day and stayed at home."

"You should have got the water when I asked you," Mrs. Goulet laughed, almost hysterically.

The bottle of strychnine was in her hand and she was trying to extract the cork, as soon as her brother closed the door. The cork was jammed in tight. Mrs. Goulet knew that she had to work quickly; the well was not more than fifty or sixty yards from the shack. When the cork would not yield she stood for a moment in confusion. In her own home there would have been a tool handy, something she could have used, but here there was nothing. She gripped the cork savagely between her teeth, but it would not move. Then she pulled open the drawer in the table, snatched at a fork and pried at the cork with all her strength, bending the fork in the process. The cork came out.

"Paper!" She had not thought of paper or of anything to carry the crystals in. In her agony and rage she cursed Macdonald. She would have been prepared for this eventuality if he had not occupied her mind so, she thought, illogically blaming him for her own forgetfulness. In the

surge of emotions that were sweeping over her, came a feeling of self-pity. What a mess she was landing herself in! And no help from anyone! Curse them all! Curse them! But her eyes did not cease their search of the room for something that would serve to carry the poison. There was nothing. Macdonald could not read, and therefore had no necessity for paper. There was not a scrap anywhere.

Mrs. Goulet poured some of the crystals into the palm of her hand. With the other, she replaced the cork and returned the bottle to its place. A moment afterward Macdonald came in.

"Here's your damned water," he said gracefully. "The wind blew it out of the pail all over my legs. I'm wet up to my knees."

But Mrs. Goulet did not hear him. Her mind was too full of other things. She had the poison gripped in her palm and the stuff seemed to be red hot.

"Why, you ain't wiped up the floor!" her brother cried. "Say! What d'you think I am?"

"Wipe it yourself," she retorted. "D'you think I'm going to wipe up your dirty floor?"

"Well, that's a hell of a note!" commented Stephen with an injured air. "A hell of a note! You're stringing me pretty good!"

"Not so bad as I'm strung with you," she replied enigmatically. With difficulty she inserted her arms in her coat, her tightly closed hand hindering her greatly. She banged the door when she went out, and Macdonald did not notice that his sister had not taken a drink after all.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN Mrs. Goulet had fought her way home she found her husband, Margaret and Vedene in the house. It had grown too dark to work outside. The storm, too, had made working very uncomfortable. Goulet had been impressed by his wife's thoughtfulness in sending Margaret out with his mitts, and was anxious to be friendly. When Susan entered, Margaret, who was laying the supper table, smiled at her step-mother. Margaret, too, had gathered definite impressions from the incident of the mitts.

"Hallo, Susan," Goulet said cheerily. "Must have had quite a job coming through that wind. I've been expecting it to snow all afternoon. Hardly thought you'd go out."

With those white crystals scorching her palm Susan could not ignore her husband's greeting, and her brilliant eyes flashed an answer to Margaret though the girl little realized the agony it cost.

"I didn't notice it," she said, quite truthfully, having been unconscious of the wind. She longed to get into the bedroom. A fixed smile lined her face. Whatever she did, she was afraid of arousing suspicion. One moment she thought she was too friendly, the next she was afraid that she was not friendly enough. "I think the wind's worse here than it is near Steve's," she said, and then cursed herself for a fool for saying it. They knew that couldn't be so.

"Maybe," agreed Goulet affably. "You're back here anyway."

There was nothing to add to this obvious fact and Mrs. Goulet sought refuge in the bedroom. She found a sheet of newspaper, tore a piece from it, opened her stiffened

fingers and allowed the strychnine crystals to run from her plam. She had lost some, yet about an ordinary teaspoonful remained. There was enough. That nightmare was over; though she could hardly realize it. It seemed difficult to imagine that the little heap of white crystals lying upon the paper, very much like coarse salt, could have cost so much agony of mind.

Mrs. Goulet did not waste much time looking at the crystals and thinking of the price she had paid for them, but made a tight pellet of the poison which she placed inside her dress. She could not bear to leave it where she could neither see nor feel it. For a few moments she bent over the bed and rested her head upon the pillow, sick and weary of the whole business. The fire in her seemed to have burned itself out. If it were not for that will and that house. . . . !

She sat sewing after the others had gone to bed. Goulet had said simply as he left the room: "Good-night Susan," and just as simply she had answered him.

She wondered if they were all asleep; fearful of doing what she had yet to do. If one of them came out while she was engaged upon her atrocious task, she could think of no plausible excuse for her actions.

At last she was convinced that everyone but herself was asleep, and went to the cupboard, opened it noiselessly, and stealthily took from it an enamelled cup and the vinegar bottle. With these she returned to the stove, which she had kept burning. She unwrapped the poison, poured it into the cup and covered the crystals with vinegar. Her movements were so guarded that she made no sound. In a few minutes the vinegar began to boil and she moved the cup to the rear of the stove and watched the strychnine dissolve. When it had disappeared, she took the cup from the stove and stood it upon the table to cool.

While she had been occupied her imagination had been dormant. She had been so engrossed that she had had no time for thought. Now thought crowded upon her.

What if she had made the poison too weak; had used too much vinegar? The strychnine would have dissolved in less. The poison would perhaps only make her husband deathly sick, and a doctor would be called. Mrs. Goulet entertained almost a superstitious fear of a doctor's powers. She could feel the noose about her neck.

Yet, the poison must be strong enough! An ounce of strychnine would render three full pails of oats so deadly that a single oat would kill a gopher. Once she had watched one of the little rodents eat a single oat. She had not believed that one oat—it seemed so small—could carry so vast a load as death. After eating the oat, the gopher had sat up and barked at her; came closer, then darted away, fearing a trap. Suddenly a partial paralysis gripped him; he tried to get back to his hole, but his hind legs were powerless. Mrs. Goulet had seen crows drop among the grain, and found afterwards, the dead gophers from which the birds had plucked the hearts—and death. Once she had seen a mother coyote trying to drag herself to her litter from a field of growing grain in which she had caught and eaten poisoned gophers.

As she thought of these things Mrs. Goulet was reassured; there could be no failure with so virulent a poison. She poured the cooled mixture into a small bottle and corked it. They would see about the will now! And Margaret should have her house! She would show them!

The cat came from beneath the stove purring cheerfully and rubbed against Mrs. Goulet's ankles. He was a well fed cat—content with himself and with the comfortable quarters he found himself in. His purr was confident, but Susan did not heed him.

Mrs. Goulet's thoughts were too unstable to remain long in a mood of triumph, and a new fear beset her. Supposing the poison was too strong. She had heard that an overdose of poison acted as its own antidote, and the knowledge frightened her. She had a vision of her husband pointing an accusing finger at her. Her eyes started with horror, and she sank into her chair weak and sick. She could

not be sure. There was no way of telling. The cat tried to comfort her; and circled her legs, purring loudly.

Mrs. Goulet took her hand from before her weary eyes, and looked at the bottle standing upon the table as if it were a thing accursed. She hated it! The poison was nothing but a trap! Why not smash the bottle now and have done with the whole thing? She stood up and put out her hand.

Then she noticed the cat, and paused rigid and motionless. The cat saw that his mistress was looking at him and, meowing, stuck his tail straight into the air in a feline desire to show his pleasure. The end of his stiffened tail curled back and forth with a nervous twitching that showed his gratification. On the shelf at the back of the stove stood a saucepan containing a stew that Mrs. Goulet had prepared for the morrow's breakfast. Swiftly she went to the cupboard and took from it a spoon and a saucer. The cat seemed to know that he was going to have a meal and rubbed himself in a congratulatory manner against the legs of the table.

Mrs. Goulet filled the saucer from the saucepan, making the cat's meal a good one, as it was the last he was apt to have. From the bottle containing the strychnine she poured not quite half a teaspoonful, and stirred it into the almost jellied stew. Then she put the saucer on the floor.

The cat sniffed at the mess dubiously; not liking the smell of the vinegar. But the savoury odour of the meat proved too much for him, and he drew the larger pieces from the saucer and ate them. When no more was left he had become accustomed to the taint of the vinegar and proceeded to lap up the whole of the mixture. He finished, looked up, and licked his mouth dry, slowly and deliberately, and with his paw, wiped away a little of the stew that soiled his otherwise immaculate nose. He appeared to be a most comfortable and well satisfied cat and looked up at Mrs. Goulet as if he expected her approval.

But that lady could not touch him now. She could not have put a finger upon him then for all the world. Her

eyes as she watched the cat appeared to protrude, and, giving her up as a bad job, the animal crawled beneath the stove.

Mrs. Goulet waited in a ghastly silence. Her clenched hands were drawn up beneath her chin, and every muscle in her was hard and tense. It seemed that she waited for hours before there was a movement beneath the stove.

The cat meowed again, but there was a different note in it now, a note of pain that gripped Mrs. Goulet's heart. With starting eyes she saw the cat's forepaws extend, the claws wide open and digging into the boards of the floor as the animal tried to pull himself forward.

Mrs. Goulet could not move as she watched the cat's painful progress. Why had she done what she had? she wondered. The cat was her only friend, the only living thing that came to her expecting nothing but a caress. She might have known that the strychnine would work. It always worked.

The spell that held her immovable broke at last. Swiftly—seemingly not caring whether she was heard or not—she got a can of mustard from the cupboard, mixed some in water, and tried to force it down the cat's throat. But his jaws were clenched. Already his hind legs were stretched behind him. There was nothing she could do.

She sank back into her chair, and watched the dying cat with agony. There was nothing she could do! Nothing! Nothing! It was another item on the score that had to be settled.

The cat rolled upon his side, his body stiffening, and his pathetic and wistful eyes begged Mrs. Goulet for help.

At last they closed and she picked up the body and laid it under the stove. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

Vedene was the first out of bed in the morning. Mrs. Goulet had not closed her eyes all night, waiting anxiously for this moment. She had washed the cup in which she had dissolved the strychnine, also the saucer from which the cat had eaten and the glass she had used for the mustard. She was convinced that there was nothing to give a clue to

the cause of the cat's death, yet was tortured by a fear that she had overlooked some detail which would betray her.

Vedene put on his boots, then crossed to the window and looked out. It was still far from daylight, yet the kitchen and the bedroom were illuminated by a ghostly radiance that Mrs. Goulet knew came from the snow that had fallen. The wind was blowing harder than ever.

"It snowed all right," called Vedene to no one in particular.

The next moment Mrs. Goulet heard him lighting the lamp; light appeared at the crack at the bottom of the bedroom door and down one side of it as it stood ajar.

Goulet stirred and stretched himself, raising his arms above his head and yawning. Mrs. Goulet lay as straight as a ruler, not daring to move, and the fear that she might touch her husband or he her, was hideous. She felt sure that she would scream if it happened.

With these thoughts swirling in her brain she mentally followed Vedene's movements. He went to the range, shook the ashes from the fire-box and commenced to whittle a piece of kindling into slivers. Would he never discover the cat!

Then Margaret began to move in her room, and Goulet left the bed. Mrs. Goulet did not turn her head, but the sound of his bare feet on the boards seemed extraordinarily loud to her.

At last it came.

"Hallo! Why, the cat's dead!"

A moment of silence. Then Goulet:

"The cat? Where?"

"He's underneath the stove, all stiff!"

Goulet dashed from the bedroom, his suspenders swinging behind him. Mrs. Goulet heard the door of Margaret's room open, and the sound of her slippered feet as she crossed the floor. Then her voice:

"Poor pussy! I wonder what he died of?"

"He ain't so old," said Vedene. "It couldn't have been old age."

"Old nothing!" exclaimed Goulet. "He wasn't more than three. He was all right when I went to bed."

Margaret had evidently picked the body up. "Poor pussy!" she said again. "Who would have thought of you dying."

"Oh, well," Goulet observed, "it's only a cat. I guess we'll have to get another."

Mrs. Goulet hated him for that speech.

"Susan!" Goulet called, not aware that she was awake. "The cat's dead!"

"I'm coming."

She was already out of bed—they had to be faced. She dressed in a few minutes.

Knowing that the cat was a favourite with Mrs. Goulet the three wondered how she would take its death. She snatched it from the floor, and looked at it with straining eyes. But the look did not mean what the others thought it did. Mrs. Goulet was in mortal fear that a trace of the mustard and water might still remain upon the cat's coat.

"It's no use worrying about it," said Goulet sympathetically. "I guess he was sick some way and we didn't know it."

"Or perhaps he'd eaten something," suggested Vedene.

"Goodness knows what it was," Margaret contributed. "It's funny though."

Mrs. Goulet looked up at that quickly.

"What's funny?" she demanded. "What's funny?"

"I didn't mean it that way!" cried the girl, surprised that so ordinary an expression should be misunderstood. "There's nothing funny about it to me. I'm sorry."

Mrs. Goulet put the cat down. "You'd better take it out when you go," she said, and went back to the bedroom.

The tragedy appeared to weigh heavily upon the three in the kitchen. They knew that Mrs. Goulet valued the cat highly, and, sympathizing with her, they moved about quietly.

In a few minutes Susan reappeared and began to help Margaret prepare the breakfast.

"We'll have that stew," she said. "I want it eaten up. Don't make so much porridge."

The men were dressing to go out and to the chores.

"I'll get you another cat, Susan," said Goulet kindly. "I guess I'll go to town to-day. We wouldn't be able to work on the building. After breakfast, Margaret and Francet had better drive the cattle down. I guess we'll have to start feeding. This snow looks as if it's going to keep on."

Francet opened the lantern and lighted it. Goulet took the cat by the tail.

"Well, pussy," he said, "you know what's on the other side of the wall now, and that's something!" He opened the door and he and Francet went out.

With the closing of the door doubts began to crowd upon Mrs. Goulet again. Suppose Goulet ate so much of the porridge that the sharp edge of his appetite was lost, and he were to take objection to the stew! Suppose! Suppose! Her mind seethed in a maze of suppositions. It had to be done now—in another hour he would be off to town. She moved about the room in a purposeless, aimless way, delaying more than helping forward the preparation of the meal. Margaret thought that the death of the cat had upset her, and was surprised at the depth of her step-mother's feeling. It made her see Mrs. Goulet in a new light.

"It's a pity about the cat," said the girl.

But Mrs. Goulet did not answer. She was at the stove lifting the lid of the pot of porridge.

"I don't think we'll have this," she said. "We'll have the stew. That'll be better on such a day as this. It's so cold and stormy and you'll all be out in it."

Vedene returned, carrying a pail of milk. He shook the snow from his coat.

"It's storming bad," he said. "It's going to be a brute."

Mrs. Goulet waited for her husband to follow. She had the bottle of poison inside her bodice so that she could reach it in a moment. She hardly knew what she was doing; moved like one in a trance. Her hands were trembling so that she feared to touch the dishes, yet she forced herself to the task.

Vedene washed himself and sat down. Margaret grew impatient.

"I wonder what father's doing?"

"Don't know," replied Vedene. "He was just about ready to come when I left. Just giving Tom a brush down."

"Shall I put the stew out?" asked Margaret. "He can't be long now."

Mrs. Goulet did not know what to do, but action of any kind was preferable to inaction.

"You pass me the plates," she said. "Save your father's till the last."

She came to Goulet's plate. Now it had to be done—now, or not at all. She glanced swiftly over her shoulder. Margaret was not looking. The girl knew that there was only the one plate to be taken to the table and she expected her step-mother to bring that. Vedene was bending down taking off his leather boots and replacing them with moccasins. Swiftly Mrs. Goulet withdrew the bottle of strychnine from her bodice, extracted the cork and poured the poison into the hot stew upon the plate. Cold as ice, now that the deed was done, she carried the plate to the table and set it in its place.

"I guess we'd better start," said Margaret.

"I'll go and see what's keeping him," said Vedene.

"He spoke of taking the cutter, but I didn't think the snow would be deep enough. Maybe he's fixing it up."

The two women sat and waited. Mrs. Goulet was completely dazed. The strain of the last few days had reached the culminating point—she could endure no more. Strange fancies began to come to her. She seemed to be outside herself, looking at her own body.

Margaret happened to catch sight of her face. It was twitching.

"What is it?" she cried in alarm, going to the older woman's side and shaking her arm.

Mrs. Goulet's burning eyes strayed to the girl's face.

"I think I'm sick," she muttered.

"Let me help you back to bed. You'd better lie down."

But Mrs. Goulet shook her head.

"No!" she gasped, swallowing hard. "I'll stay here."

Neither of them heard the sound of Vedene returning. The door dashed open, and he stood inside, the wind and the snow blowing in from behind him.

Margaret turned from her step-mother impatiently—the kitchen was chilled by the open door. Vedene's expression choked the remonstrance in the girl's throat, and she stood staring at him. Mrs. Goulet slowly rose to her feet, her eyes wide and blazing, but for a moment not a word was spoken.

"He's dead!" she cried at last.

Vedene closed the door without turning his head.

"Stone dead," he said, as if the words were torn from him. "Tom smashed his chest in."

For a moment Mrs. Goulet continued to stare at him. She was standing beside the table, holding to it to steady herself. Suddenly she laughed, if such a sound can be described as laughter. In the silence it seemed monstrous.

"Dead!" she shrieked, her voice rising high and shrill. "Dead!" and laughed again. But even as she laughed, she pitched headlong forward, dragging the tablecloth with her, so that the plates and their contents were strewn upon the floor.

CHAPTER XIII

THE morning of the funeral was very cold. A bleak wind swept in powerful gusts over the prairie and a dun sky narrowed the horizon. The world seemed in mourning.

Vedene brought the cutter to the door for the two women. They wrapped the four big stones that they had been heating in the oven in two grain sacks, and put them on the floor of the cutter to use as foot-warmers during the long drive of sixteen miles to town. Then they donned the last and the heaviest of their coats and were ready. Mrs. Goulet hesitated at the door. She spoke in the quiet hushed tone that had become habitual to them during the last four days, though why they had adopted it they could not have told. It was their unconscious tribute to death. In the house where Goulet had lived so long they could not reconcile themselves to the fact of his death.

"I don't think there's anything more," Mrs. Goulet said. She stood with the handle of the door in her hand looking round the kitchen. Margaret followed her eyes. The sense of an unaccustomed and irksome authority lay heavily upon them. Both had a feeling that something would go wrong, something would be forgotten.

"I don't think there's anything else," Margaret replied.

Mrs. Goulet opened the door.

The empty cutter appeared strange to them. Neither of the two women had ever driven to town without Goulet. It had always been their part to sit beside him as he drove, now one of them must do the driving.

Mrs. Goulet hesitated and stood aside: "You drive."

But Margaret drew back. "No! Not me. You."

So Mrs. Goulet took the lines. Vedene stood away from the heads of the horses and came to the side of the cutter.

"Are you going to come back to-night?" he asked. The tone of his voice seemed peculiar to Margaret. There was a strained appearance in his eyes, she thought, as if he were making a strong effort to control himself. She knew how he wished to go to the funeral, and could not understand why her step-mother raised objections to his going. It was incomprehensible to her. Everyone knew what Vedene had thought of her father. Margaret put out her mittened hand. She could feel the grip of his hard fingers through his heavy mitten.

"We'll try to get back," Mrs. Goulet answered, as the cutter began to move. The horses walked through the yard, passed the barn, and came to the bridge, which was swept bare of snow. The planks gripped the steel of the runners, and the cutter moved forward in a series of little jerks. When the horses reached the snow, they broke into a trot, the bells upon their harness starting a rhythmic jingle which seemed to keep time to the dull beat of their hoofs.

Before the cutter reached the spot where the trail dipped to the flat, Margaret turned. Vedene was standing at the corner of the house. He was already almost invisible, and she knew that he could not see her, but she waved her hand to him. A moment afterward she saw his shapeless mitten in the air in a gesture of farewell. How had he come to do that? she wondered. How had he known that she would be looking back? "Poor Francet," she thought. She felt as if they were deserting and betraying him.

Snow began to fall. Not in flakes, but in tiny particles that were visible only when they fell upon something that outlined them; it was as if the air had suddenly become filled with smoke. The horizon contracted and hemmed them in. The dull thudding of the horses' hoofs, the creaking of the cutter, and the hiss of the tormented, wind-driven snow, as it eddied and curled, trace high, in its search for a resting place, and the steady tintinnabulation of the bells upon the harness were the only sounds that came to them.

Margaret was sitting on the windward side. Before they were half way to town she began to feel cold. Her face was turned as a protection from the snow and she could see her step-mother's profile. She admired the granite-hard, resolute strength in it, yet it intimidated her, made her realize her loneliness. Her thoughts went back to Vedene, and she wished that he were with them.

On reaching town they drove to the only hotel. The door opened and a number of men came out and greeted them. One of them offered to take the team to the livery barn.

"Thanks," said Mrs. Goulet, accepting the offer. She knew that the eyes of all the men were upon her, covertly watching her manner to give them a clue as to how she had taken the loss of her husband.

"Hello, Bill," she said, with just the right amount of heartiness, so that the men did not know whether she was brave or callous, "and Malcolme and Jack and Duncan. It's been a cold drive."

The men shuffled in relief. That was the way to take it, they decided, although afterwards when they debated the question they were not unanimous in their approval of her deportment. At the particular moment when she greeted them, however, they were very glad that she was not obviously distressed. Margaret, standing at her step-mother's back, made them feel a little uncomfortable. She appeared dazed, as if she wanted to shrink into a hiding place. Almost unaware of what she was doing, she opened the door of the hotel and went in. Mrs. Goulet followed. The room they entered was an office, smoking and sitting-room combined. Chairs lined the walls, and the voices of the dozen or more men who occupied them ceased as the women came in. Margaret felt that she and her step-mother were a show, the hush was so marked and the appraising, curious glances so evident.

"I'll take you right up to your room, Mrs. Goulet," said the clerk, Joe Weatherall. He put his pipe down. Then, because he thought the occasion worthy of ceremony,

pitched his hat into a corner under the desk. He wished to show that he knew how to behave himself in the presence of ladies, especially upon such an occasion as this. At the back of his mind he had long entertained an idea that Mrs. Goulet thought rather highly of him—and she was a widow now. He led the way upstairs.

"When Francet was in he said you wanted a room. I picked this out for you." Opening the door of one of the rooms facing upon the street, he added: "Best room in the house."

The two women entered and the clerk stood in the doorway. "I've had it all fixed up extra for you."

Mrs. Goulet thanked him. She was beginning to appreciate the attention being paid her and to find it attractive.

Becoming a little more confident, Joe, still holding the handle of the door, said:

"Too bad about Goulet. All of a sudden like that too."

Mrs. Goulet was removing her coat. She took her handkerchief from her pocket.

"It was a shock," she admitted, with an air that added: "But I bore it bravely."

"It would be," said Joe. "I'm glad to see you ain't all broken up."

"I was at first. Margaret could tell you what happened to me."

Joe turned his gaze upon the girl. As he remarked afterward: "She looked like she was seeing things." Margaret's eyes were fixed upon her step-mother in profound bewilderment. It seemed impossible to her that this was the woman she had lived with all her life. This was an utter stranger.

Margaret could not say a word. Joe turned to Mrs. Goulet again and remarked with a doleful air:

"Well, we've all got to go some time."

Mrs. Goulet unfolded her handkerchief, and spread it across her knees. She had taken a seat upon the bed. Margaret, staring at her, wondered if she were going to pretend to cry.

"Yes," Mrs. Goulet agreed meekly. "We've all got to go some time, and the quicker it comes when it does come the better."

"It's all right if you can look at it like that," commented Joe, and then continued with a sage shake of his head: "But you've got to have the nerve to look at it that way."

"I hope they fixed up a decent coffin," Mrs. Goulet continued.

"It ain't so good," replied Joe. "Old Nicholson couldn't get any boards in town broad enough to make the sides or the top or the bottom in one piece. So he went to work and made it out of fir flooring, and a real good job he's made of it considering. It's all smooth outside, but of course he had to put cleats on the inside. They don't show though. Of course, you could have sent to Winnipeg and got a reg'lar coffin, but that would have taken a long time. It wouldn't have mattered though, I guess, now that the freeze-up's come."

Mrs. Goulet agreed, however, that it was better not to delay the funeral.

"I'd rather have it over and done with. I guess Goulet don't mind what kind of a coffin he's got."

Joe laughed in as melancholy a manner as he could to harmonize with the discussion.

"We stained it a deep mahogany. It looks pretty nifty."

"I'm glad of that. I wouldn't like people to think we hadn't done the best we could. Was anyone able to rustle any flowers?"

"There ain't a blamed flower in the country," Joe informed her. "It's tough, but it can't be helped. They would have had to come from Winnipeg and that's too far away."

Mrs. Goulet sighed. "Oh, well! It can't be helped," she commented, bearing her disappointment with fortitude. "We're always wanting things we can't have. Do you know if they fastened the coffin down?"

"I told old Nicholson he'd better not. I ses to Nicholson, 'Maybe they'll want to have another look at him before he's fastened down.' And some of the bunch that's coming in to the funeral might too. He looks all right. He's frozen stiff, but you wouldn't know it to look at him. His face looks real natural; it wasn't hurt at all. That was pretty lucky."

Mrs. Goulet thanked him for his thoughtfulness.

"I guess it's right to look at him for the last time. You'll want to see your father again, too, won't you, Margaret?" Mrs. Goulet had been acutely and uncomfortably aware of the girl's eyes fixed upon her. They had distracted her attention somewhat from what she felt was a conversation befitting the occasion. Secretly Mrs. Goulet was irritated, but she was careful not to allow Joe to see that. Her voice was insinuating as she addressed Margaret, but the girl detected the underlying sharpness. Mrs. Goulet repeated: "You'll want to see your father again won't you, Margy?"

Margaret shook her head. The idea of looking at her father was unbearable. For four days the girl had been weighed down by the awfulness and mystery of death. Now this! It seemed impossible and incredible that it was her father of whom her step-mother and Joe Weatherall were talking. And now they wanted her to look at his frozen body! She wondered if they were pretending. Surely, surely, this couldn't be how they really felt and thought!

"No, I'm not going." Her voice was strained and sharp.

"But you ought to," insisted Mrs. Goulet. "People won't think it right."

"I don't care what they think," replied the girl.

Mrs. Goulet saw that she was determined, and the opposition fanned her temper.

"I don't think it's the way a daughter should act," she snapped. "Suppose I was to act in the same way and both of us stopped from going. What d'you think

all the people would say? Everyone with any real feelings looks at the body for the last time just before its fastened down. You don't seem to know anything!" Then she added, it occurring to her that this was an effective observation to make: "In spite of all the reading your father taught you."

"I'm not going," Margaret repeated.

Joe tried to smooth matters.

"If she don't feel like going I don't blame her," he observed placatingly. "Lots of people can't stand looking at a body, especially the body of anyone they knew well. It don't always show they ain't got the right feelings either. I guess you'll both be glad and feel better when it's all over. Must have been fierce waiting to come in."

Mrs. Goulet was glad of Joe's opportune interruption. She knew that her temper had been getting the better of her, and she had an uncomfortable feeling that if he had not intervened it might have grown much worse. She pulled herself together with an effort.

"I was glad to get out of the house," she said. "I felt as if there was something pressing on me all the time. I couldn't forget it at all."

"Oh, well," said Joe soothingly, "it'll be over soon now. I guess I'll have to be going. There's sure to be a bunch coming in. Most of the old-timers anyway. Shall I send anybody up if they want to come?"

Mrs. Goulet thought for a moment. She would have liked visitors but for the presence of Margaret. With her there, staring, it would be too uncomfortable.

"You needn't bother," she replied. "I'll see 'em all when I come down."

"Shall I send the dinner for the two of you up here?"

Mrs. Goulet had never had a meal sent to her room in a hotel before. The idea appealed to her.

"Sure," she replied with enthusiasm. She was getting to be the lady now—a person of importance. "Thanks Joe, for thinking of that," she said. "That's real kind of you."

"That's all right," answered Joe. "I know how to treat people. I understands how they feel."

"You sure do," agreed Mrs. Goulet.

"A real sensible woman," Joe remarked when he rejoined the men below. "It's no sign because she acts sensible that she don't feel anything. It ain't always those that squawk the most that suffers the most hell." Which deep and philosophical view so aptly phrased met with much approval.

There was silence in the room until the sound of Joe's passage along the corridor and down the stairs had ceased. From the bar-room below came a deep hum of voices. Margaret stood looking out of the window. The sky was clearing now, a steely blue appearing between the clouds. The wind had strengthened and the snow was drifting in the street below. There was not a soul visible from the window; but the jingle of sleigh-bells told of fresh arrivals.

"Well!" snapped Mrs. Goulet at last. "Are you going to stand gaping out of the window for the rest of the day? Ain't you done enough staring? You stared at those men when we came in, you stared at Joe, and you've stared at me all the time when you haven't been staring at anything else. I'm sick of your staring! Don't you know that you're in a house and that you've still got your coat on?"

Margaret turned from the window and unbuttoned her fur coat.

"I didn't know I was staring," she said. "I'm sorry."

"You sorry!" sneered Mrs. Goulet, irritated still more by the girl's meekness. "You've been disgracing me all the time. People'll think you don't care nothing about your father the way you're acting."

Margaret turned toward her step-mother, her eyes protesting.

"There you go!" said Mrs. Goulet subduing her voice with difficulty. "You're staring at me again."

Margaret turned away, took off her coat and hung it on a peg.

"I won't look at you again," she said wearily.

"No, you won't look at me," Mrs. Goulet retorted. "And why won't you look at me? I know. It's because you're ashamed of me. But it's yourself you ought to be ashamed of. You're just standing like a dummy and staring at people. You won't go and look at your dead father even. You ain't got no feelings at all!"

Through the dull pain of her mind Margaret wondered if that were true. She had not loved her father, she decided, if love was made apparent by a manner such as her step-mother's.

"Perhaps not," she replied in answer. "Perhaps not. I don't know. It all seems strange to me. I don't know how I feel—what I'm thinking. But I couldn't go and look at him now. Not with all those people looking on and watching."

"How are they to know you have any feelings unless you show them?" inquired Mrs. Goulet in contempt. "Do you think they can read your thoughts?"

"I don't care what they think," the girl repeated slowly. "Just think of it! Just think of him lying frozen in that box—my father! I can't bear to think of it! And you want me to go and look at him! I couldn't do it. I don't want to see him now. And to hear you and Joe talking as you did. You don't know what you said, nor what it meant! It was terrible!"

"Quit!" ordered Mrs. Goulet. "There's someone coming."

There was a knock at the door and Mrs. Goulet opened it.

"I'm sending your dinner up right away," said Joe. His eyes flashed over the room behind Mrs. Goulet and he saw Margaret lying face downward upon the bed. He went without another word. He thought tears in a girl very suitable under the circumstances, but being of a sentimental nature, abhorred being witness to their shedding.

Mrs. Goulet ate a solitary dinner and afterwards prepared to go out.

"I'm going over there now," she said. "I can see the people going. If you won't come, you'd better stop here till I get back, and you'd better wash your face. Your eyes are all red, and people might think you're putting it on, looking the *way you do*. And for goodness sake don't stare!"

The door closed behind Mrs. Goulet and the room was silent. The sense of quietness and of being alone was a tremendous relief to Margaret. There was only the hum of conversation from below, deeper now than it had been an hour or two earlier, and, very occasionally, the sound of a voice from the street. She went to the window and peeped out. It was blowing harder than ever, but the sky was quite clear, except far away to westward, where the horizon was black, and the snow was whirling high. The passing people appeared to be enveloped in steam, as the snow, fine as powder, eddied about them. By squeezing close to the side of the window Margaret could see the destination of those who passed. It was a little shed upon the opposite side of the street, once used as a stable. She could see figures passing in and out at the door. She imagined people packed in there, looking at her father. Because of the impression left upon her mind by the conversation between Joe and her step-mother, she fancied that she could hear the comments:

"He looks all right."

"No one would think he's dead."

"I wonder if he's real hard?"

The horror of it! How monstrous it all seemed!

Presently Mrs. Goulet came back. "You ain't got your clothes on," she complained, "and they're all ready! Hurry up! You can't expect to keep everyone waiting for you. Especially in such weather as this. And there's a storm coming."

Margaret resumed her wraps and found herself below in the general utility room. The air was blue with tobacco smoke and intolerably hot from the enormous red-hot stove. She felt as if hundreds of eyes were watching her, and

replied mechanically to the men and women who spoke to her, though what they said she did not know. She and her step-mother passed between lines of people to the door, which flew open as if by magic, and the icy wind swept in. As she stepped into the sleigh, Margaret caught a side view of her step-mother's face. It was set hard, yet betokened gratified vanity; this was a better funeral than she had thought possible, and she was imbued with a sense of importance.

The cutter began to move, and those behind to fill with their passengers. The sleighs formed a long line, the bells on the harness tinkling as the procession moved forward. The sound created a medley in Margaret's brain, and for years the jingle of sleigh-bells recalled the details of that dreadful day vividly. Sleigh-bells and death were joined inseparably in her mind.

When she took her seat in the cutter she had not noticed a sleigh standing just ahead. It was an ordinary sleigh, a farm wagon-box mounted on runners, and a large brown blanket was thrown across the box concealing its contents. When Mrs. Goulet started the horses the bob-sleigh moved also, retaining its position ahead.

"What is that?" Margaret inquired. But even as she asked the question, the answer came to her. Mrs. Goulet had not heard, or perhaps did not think it worth while to answer. Margaret could not take her eyes from the blanket. It was incredible that her father, who now seemed more precious than ever, was lying beneath it. It was all a part of the monstrous unreality that enveloped her.

They had only a short distance to go. The cemetery lay just beyond the edge of the town. It was unsheltered, not a tree nor house broke the sweep of the wind, and the snow whirled among the head-stones. Inside the barbed-wire fence, Margaret could see a number of people grouped about a mound of earth, and as the cutter turned in at the gate the girl looked back—the line of sleighs behind extended almost to the hotel.

Beside the grave the bob-sleigh came to a halt, the blanket was thrown to one side, and the long, straight coffin was revealed. Only the make of it could tell which was its head and which its foot, and the narrow boards of which it was made added to its appearance of unusual length. Across the mouth of the grave were two short pieces of poplar. The coffin was laid upon these, and then lengths of rope were passed under it. The ends of the rope were grasped by a number of men, the coffin slightly raised, and the pieces of poplar removed. The coffin began to descend—to Margaret the ground seemed to be rising. She gripped her step-mother's arm, but her hand was impatiently shaken off. The girl stood trembling.

Someone was speaking. She looked up into the man's face, and knew that this must be the burial service. Not a word came clearly to her, yet she watched the speaker with a terrible intensity. He seemed to be pronouncing a doom. He was a tall man with a black beard, and his eyes had a far-away expression in them as if he saw into the beyond. The bitter wind stirred the fringe of hair around his bald crown.

His mind was not on the service however. His abstracted gaze was caused by uneasiness and doubt over the possibility of his catching cold. He could not afford to be sick. The wind penetrated the fur coat he was wearing beneath his surplice, and he wondered if his wife had kept the children indoors. Bobbie wanted new moccasins, and Connie's coat was thin and old, and Annie ought to have new mittens. He had no money for all these things, and was deeply preoccupied by the problems of how to get it. And if the weather stayed like this he would soon need another load of wood. It was marvellous the way the wood went, and he certainly hadn't enough money to keep a family decently, and his wife wasn't any too well. This kind of weather always gave her rheumatism. He reached the spot in the service where the man who had dug the grave took a spadeful of the frozen earth and dropped it upon the coffin.

The dull thud of it broke the spell that held Margaret. She realized that this was the end, and the meaning of death, the loneliness and the desolation of it. Again she gripped her step-mother's arm and longed for Francet.

Then they were back in the sleigh and the horses were trotting. All round were trotting horses and madly jingling bells. Everyone seemed in a hurry now to get home, to get out of the cold and the wind. Over all other sounds rose the dreadful jingle of the bells.

"Are we going home now?" Margaret inquired.

Mrs. Goulet turned her head and looked at her over the high, upturned collar of her coat.

"No," she answered, with spirit. "We're not!"

"There's Francet. He's alone. He'll be expecting us."

"It'll do him good," said Mrs. Goulet conclusively.

They were back in the room in the hotel again. Mrs. Goulet sat upon the bed absorbed in thought. She had the air of one completely satisfied with the course of events. So soothing had been the effect upon her of the imposing funeral that she felt a little sympathy toward Margaret.

"Well," she observed reflectively, "that was some funeral! I'll bet Steve will be sorry he didn't come in for it when he hears all about it."

"I wouldn't be surprised," agreed Margaret.

Mrs. Goulet looked at her quickly. What was meant by that tone? she wondered. At length she said:

"You ought to be proud to have had a father every body thinks enough of to come into town on a day like this when the roads are so rotten, and it's so cold and stormy."

"I am," replied Margaret simply.

"Umph," grunted Mrs. Goulet. She felt proud of her dead husband. Now that he was dead she was quite willing to forgive him his failings. Especially since he had left her so well provided for. She removed her hat and coat, washed her hands and face, brushed her hair, and smoothed down the front of her dress; glancing at herself in the mirror not entirely without approval. "This is a

nice room," she observed. "We'll stay here to-night. There'll be lots of people staying that have a long way to go home, and I'll go and meet them. Are you coming?"

"I'd rather not. I'm tired," Margaret replied listlessly.

"I guess you're hungry. You didn't have any dinner. More fool you! But the supper won't be long now."

"I don't think I want any."

Mrs. Goulet faced her. "Look here," she exclaimed. "Don't you keep coming that stuff on me! You just won't eat, that's what's wrong with you. Don't you try to fool me! I ain't your father!"

Margaret did not answer and Mrs. Goulet left for the ladies' sitting-room. She was sure of meeting congenial souls there; women who envied her; women who sympathized with her. Either or both were agreeable to her in her present mood.

It was almost dark, and Margaret pulled down the blind, and threw herself upon the bed. The hum of voices filled the hotel; yet the insistent noise was not disturbing; it acted almost as a lullaby on her overwrought nerves. Presently the long ringing of a bell announced the evening meal. If Mrs. Goulet had come back Margaret would have gone to the dining-room with her, but she would not go alone. After a long interval the sound of clashing dishes ceased and she knew that meal-time was over. She lay listening to the different noises which presently began to die away.

After a while she lighted the lamp, undressed and crept into bed.

Later Mrs. Goulet came in and began to undress. At first she thought that Margaret was asleep. Then, with a start, she realized that the girl's eyes were fastened upon her. The expression in them awoke compassion in her. She was more inclined to be compassionate because she deemed that she had had a most successful evening.

"Did you have any supper?" she asked.

The girl shook her head.

Mrs. Goulet paused in her undressing.
"Well!" she exclaimed, her tone kindlier than it had been.

The bed was not a very large one and Margaret moved to the edge of it. She had always slept alone and the presence of her step-mother made her uncomfortable, but she was careful not to move for fear of disturbing her companion. Occasionally strange noises drifted through the open transom. Mrs. Goulet moved, and Margaret wondered if she were going to speak, but she did not. Suddenly the girl felt a quiver run through her step-mother's form, then her shoulders began to shake and Margaret knew that she was crying. Margaret was so surprised that she lay quite still.

That her step-mother should cry was almost unbelievable. Yet, as Mrs. Goulet's tremours became more violent the girl was convinced that the unbelievable was happening. A wave of pity for the older woman surged through her. She knew that her own feelings were beyond her step-mother's comprehension and now she began to wonder if Mrs. Goulet's sufferings were not beyond her own.

She thought of her step-mother being as unhappy as she had been all the day through in a different way, and put out her hand and touched the sobbing woman on the shoulder, very, very gently. Then, as she was not repulsed, she moved her hand down Mrs. Goulet's arm till it reached her fingers. The mutely sympathetic action melted Mrs. Goulet altogether. Her sobs became unrestrained. She turned in the bed and clasped Margaret in her arms, and because that was the relief Margaret had been needing for hours, she too, burst into tears. The two of them lay sobbing.

Margaret cried because she was very sorry for her step-mother and sorry that she had misjudged her. She cried because she felt sick, and because of her great loneliness; because her father was dead and lying beneath the frozen ground; because she was oppressed by the fear of what lay before her, of life and what might happen, and because there was no one now, except Francet in whom she could

trust. All these emotions and apprehensions were united in one great misery that racked her.

But Mrs. Goulet cried for quite different reasons. She was very, very tired, and all that she had gone through had told upon even her iron nerves and strong constitution. She cried because she was in a sentimental mood and sympathized with Margaret, and because she was extremely glad that she had not poisoned her husband, and because it had been such a splendid funeral—the most splendid she had seen in all her life. She cried because she knew that her husband had been a very fine man, or so many persons would not have come to his funeral. She cried because she was safe now, and her brother was safe, and there would be no house built across the creek, and no dividing of the ranch, and if Stephen didn't want to marry Margaret, nor she him, they didn't have to. She cried because Joe, the hotel clerk who had never worked on a farm in his life had paid her marked attention, and she knew that she could marry him if she wished, and when she wished; and because he was a very different kind of man from Goulet, and she was sure that she would be able to rule him without much trouble; and because she had ceased to feel so old now that she knew that Joe was ready to fall in love with her. In fact, she didn't feel old at all. The world was a pretty good place after all, and she cried because she was so relieved, and all her troubles seemed to be over.

CHAPTER XIV

MRS. GOULET did not find the presence of Vedene so objectionable as she had expected and regarded him with a wide tolerance which she thought very virtuous.

"Poor little devil," she remarked to her brother; "what would he do for a living if he were fired out of here? I know he ain't worth a dollar a day and his board, but I ain't got the heart to fire him. It would be like making one of the family get out."

Macdonald was quite indifferent to Vedene's welfare. It did occur to him, however, that his sister was taking more credit to herself than she was fairly entitled to.

"I don't know what you expect," said he. "If he was twice as big, and four times as strong as he is, he couldn't do any more than he does. He gets through all there is, don't he?"

This was the kind of remark that would have given offence to Mrs. Goulet at one time. It failed to do so now, however. She was at peace with the world, and could not be provoked.

"Well," she admitted grudgingly, "I suppose he does."

As a matter of fact Vedene was doing more than he had ever done before. When the weather was bad and the cattle had to have more feed and greater attention, Goulet had been in the habit of sharing the work: but now, the more stormy and cold the weather, the longer Vedene was forced to work.

Macdonald left for his home; Margaret was very quiet and there was nothing to disturb Mrs. Goulet's serenity. Occasionally she glanced through the window that overlooked the flats and the lake. Vedene was working at one

of the stacks. It was a beautiful day, and the cattle spreading across the snow-covered meadow, gave her a pleasant feeling that warmed her heart. Her meadows, her hay, her cattle, her hired man! All hers! She felt very proud and soothed and kind withal, being quite aware that many a woman in her position would have made conditions very uncomfortable for those with whom she had disagreed at different times.

"I don't think I'll bother cooking that joint to-day," she announced. "There's that cold meat. I think we'll use that up and be rid of it."

Reposing upon a dish before her was a huge sirloin of beef. Mrs. Goulet looked at it, and admired it. She was in the mood to admire anything.

"Say! That's a dandy joint!" she remarked to Margaret. "It seems a shame not to cook it."

Margaret came nearer to get a better view of the beef, and joined in Mrs. Goulet's approval.

"Oh, well, we won't cook it to-day," decided Mrs. Goulet. "We've got to get rid of that cold meat first. I'll get up some vegetables and we'll have a hash. We'll cook the joint to-morrow."

She lifted the trap-door in the floor and disappeared down a flight of steps to the cellar. When she reappeared, she passed the window that overlooked the lake, and glanced through it again. She saw more than she expected, and came to a stop.

"Well!" she exclaimed, "if there ain't someone coming!"

Margaret was churning, but she abandoned her churn and rushed to the window. Visitors were few and far between.

"I wonder who it can be?" Margaret exclaimed.

"It's a slap-up rig anyway," commented Mrs. Goulet. "High stepping team, and look at the robes!"

"It isn't any of the neighbours," decided Margaret. Neighbours included all those living within a radius of twenty miles. "None of them have such an outfit as that. Must be from town."

"From town! I wonder who would come from town?" conjectured Mrs. Goulet, very well pleased at the idea of entertaining a visitor from town.

The cutter approached rapidly. It was drawn by a team of greys and the polished harness flashed in the sun. A grey fur robe was flung over the back of the seat and a second robe of the same colour covered the knees of the driver. The man waved his hand to Vedene who was crossing the meadow with a load of hay. The gesture was so characteristic that both Mrs. Goulet and Margaret recognized the visitor at once.

"Joe!" exclaimed Margaret, turning to stare at her step-mother.

"Joe!" echoed Mrs. Goulet gazing spell-bound at the girl. The heart of Mrs. Goulet beat faster. She was so pleasantly surprised that she hardly knew what she was doing. She put the pan of vegetables on the table and unfastened her apron-strings.

"I wonder what he wants?" said Margaret. Since the day of her father's funeral, almost two months before, she had disliked Joe. The remark caused Mrs. Goulet to recover quickly from her confusion. She retorted tartly:

"I don't suppose he wants anything. Can't he visit without wanting something I'd like to know?"

"I suppose he can," Margaret replied dryly, "but I don't suppose he would."

"You suppose too much," snapped Mrs. Goulet. "I hate to see you so suspicious of everyone. It ain't called for, let me tell you. Joe's all right!"

Margaret was not convinced; but she was chary about entering into a discussion concerning Joe. She did not consider Joe worth troubling about.

Mrs. Goulet flattered herself that she knew the reason of Joe's visit.

"I'll go and straighten myself up," she said, so flustered that Margaret regarded her with wonder.

"Don't stand there looking at me!" snapped Mrs. Goulet. "We won't have that hash for dinner now."

Throw all those things down the cellar again. Don't bother about going down, or you won't be up when he gets here. Then you can put the joint in the oven. We'll have that."

"I haven't finished churning," Margaret objected.

"Let it go. We ain't stuck for a bit of butter," and Mrs. Goulet disappeared into the bedroom.

In a few moments the sound of the sleigh-bells drew near and again Margaret had the feeling of standing beside her father's grave. There was not much time, however, to think.

"Hallo! How's everybody?" was Joe's greeting when Margaret opened the door. "Say! But you're looking fine!" he went on with a glance that expressed both approval and admiration. Joe prided himself on his way with the ladies.

"I'm pretty good," replied Margaret, not at all impressed. "Are you going to stay?"

"Sure I'm going to stay," replied Joe breezily. "I guess there's room enough in the barn for the team for a while?"

"Lots of it."

"Won't be a minute," said Joe, turning his team, but Margaret wished that he'd go for ever.

"Well! If that ain't a way to greet anyone!" called Mrs. Goulet from the bedroom when the door shut.

"Why? What did I do wrong then?"

"The idea of asking if he was going to stay. You might just as well have said, 'Don't stay!' That's a lovely way to greet a visitor, I must say!"

"But I didn't mean it like that," Margaret explained, "and Joe didn't take it that way."

"That's because he's good-natured," returned Mrs. Goulet. "Anyone can see he's an awful good-natured man."

Margaret stood still with surprise at the cooing note in her step-mother's voice.

"Have you got that joint in the oven?" asked Mrs. Goulet with a return to her usual manner.

"I'm just going to put it in."

"Then peel some potatoes. I'll be right out in a minute."

The minute was a long one, and before it expired, Joe returned.

"Gosh; it's a swell day!" he cried. "Just like summer. Who'd want to go to California!" He took off his fur coat and, quite at home at once, hung it behind the door. He was a tall man, about forty-six years of age and very fair. His moustache was lone, his skin was clear and his cheeks were ruddy though a little too fleshy. His eyes were a light blue. Mrs. Goulet thought him very handsome.

"Where's mother?" he asked.

"She'll be out in a minute. She's fixing herself." The girl's tone conveyed to Joe her enjoyment in being able to tell him that.

"Don't you get telling me any secrets now," he warned playfully. "I don't want to hear none."

"I'm sure I won't tell you any," replied Margaret with what Joe thought was unnecessary emphasis. Joe, however, was not easily discomfited. He greeted Mrs. Goulet, who appeared at that moment with: "Well, well! If I'd a known that you'd go to so much trouble about me, I'd have called before."

Mrs. Goulet gave Margaret a venomous look. To Joe she said:

"I was so surprised when I saw who it was a-coming that you could a pushed me over like that!" she said, making a little pushing motion with her hand to illustrate her meaning.

"Now! Now!" he exclaimed. "You're trying to josh me."

"There ain't no josh about," protested Mrs. Goulet.

"I guess you're sorry I came then," he laughed. "But I couldn't help it. The day was so fine and I ain't never been out this way before. I wanted to see you all, and see how you've been getting along."

"Well, we're glad you've called anyway," replied Mrs. Goulet. "Ain't we, Margaret?"

"Why, surely," agreed Margaret, so dryly that such an hardened and experienced campaigner as Joe, knew that it would be bad tactics to allow her remark to pass unnoticed.

"Margaret ain't so glad to see me," he laughed. "She'd like one of the young birds better."

Mrs. Goulet pretended to laugh too.

"It ain't always the young ones that has the most to 'em," she protested.

"You bet your life!" corroborated Joe emphatically. "It's the old ones that knows what's what!"

"But you ain't an old one," objected Mrs. Goulet, who wanted to feel young herself now that life was proving so exciting.

"Well, I ain't what you call old," admitted Joe, "and yet I ain't what you could call a kid exactly. I don't expect to get any more teeth when what I've got begin to go on me."

"Have any gone yet?" asked Margaret pointedly.

Joe chose to treat the remark as a perfect exhibition of the ready "come back" as he called it. "That's a good one," he roared. "Who said she was slow!"

Mrs. Goulet regarded the girl ominously.

"Was that supposed to be funny?" she inquired.

"Oh, now!" exclaimed Joe. "Don't let's get making a fuss over a little thing like that! It served me right."

Vedene came in, relieving the tension, and was greeted boisterously by Joe.

"Hallo, old sport, and how are we to-day? As spry as usual?"

"Not so bad," replied Vedene, wondering what had brought Joe there. The country had no attractions for Joe as a rule, Vedene knew. "What's happened to you?" he inquired with his customary directness. "Get lost or something?"

Joe felt the situation was getting a little difficult.

"Just fancy me getting lost!" he cried. "That's a good one! No, siree! I'm doing the polite—visiting."

"Umph!" Vedene grunted.

The exclamation annoyed Mrs. Goulet. She perceived that the path of love was going to be as rough for her as it is held to be proverbially, unless she took decided steps and took them at once. With her usual dispatch she proceeded to take them immediately.

"It's like your gall," she said to Vedene, "to come out with remarks like that. What's it got to do with you if Mr. Weatherall comes a-visiting here? You keep your mouth shut! I won't have anybody that calls here insulted!"

Vedene was taken by surprise.

"All right," he said at last. "But hadn't you better wait till I insult somebody?"

Joe found Mrs. Goulet's championship somewhat too strenuous. He perceived that he would have no difficulty in making love to her. The difficulty would be to keep up with her.

"Let's go and have a look around before dinner," he suggested.

Mrs. Goulet hurried into the bedroom for her hat and coat while Joe stood in the kitchen waiting for her and whistling loudly in an endeavour to conceal his embarrassment.

"Watch that meat, Margaret," Mrs. Goulet said, when she rejoined them. "And you can lay the table, and put the potatoes on in another half hour. Francet, get some cream out of the can. We won't be long." She turned to Joe with a smile. "I'm all ready," she said coyly.

The door had no sooner closed than Vedene rushed to the window and peered out after the retreating couple. Mrs. Goulet appeared to be snuggling against Joe's side. Francet gasped: "Here, come and have a look at 'em!"

Margaret joined him and they remained with their faces close to the glass, both so amazed that they forgot

the danger of discovery. Both Mrs. Goulet did not turn, being too deeply steeped in the intoxicating thrill of the moment to think of anything else but her own happiness. Soon she and Joe reached a spot where they could no longer be seen from the window.

"What d'you know about that!" cried Vedene. "If that don't beat the band!"

"It's horrible!" Margaret exclaimed.

"Here, don't you get crying!" cried Vedene. "It's all right, but don't you let her see that she's got your goat like that."

"I won't cry," Margaret replied stoutly, "but it seems so dreadful, so—so—oh, I don't know what to call it!"

"You'd better not cry. She'll bawl you out if you do, and that'll make it worse still. She gets me right when she bawls me out. If she was decent you could take it all right. But from her——!" Vedene relapsed into silence. "Come on, Margey, buck up," he entreated, patting her arm gently. "Don't let her see that you ain't all right when she comes back."

Margaret fought the tears back.

"I wonder what is going to happen," she said, but she knew, and realized that Francet knew, although they dared not put their apprehensions into words.

"You turn her on to me when she goes for you," advised Vedene. "She can't hurt me any. And I ain't afraid of her."

"But she'll fire you if she gets mad," Margaret objected, "and then there would be nobody. I don't know what I'd do then!"

Vedene thought. He could see no solution of the difficulty. "The two of us can stick it together," he said presently. "It ain't so bad then. It's a good job she's quit throwing Steve at you. It's going to be rotten enough without that."

The spluttering of the roast in the oven aroused Margaret to her duties. As she basted the meat she forgot her forebodings for the moment in her desire to give her

step-mother no cause for complaint when she returned. "I'll have to hurry with the table," she said.

It was not long before Mrs. Goulet and Joe came in. Mrs. Goulet had not been able to abandon herself wholly to the pleasures of the moment. She had been troubled by the possibility of the meat being burnt in her absence. She went straight to the stove and peered anxiously into the oven.

"That's fine," she exclaimed. She had an eye then for the table, but could find no fault. She was wearing a black taffeta dress, and over this she tied a big white apron. Black suited her to perfection. Her skin was creamy white above her bodice, and her large, passionate, black eyes glowed ardently. Joe could hardly take his eyes from her. He was scarcely able to believe in his good fortune. He had an idea that something was bound to go wrong somewhere. Hitherto fortune had favoured him with more kicks than smiles, and he had difficulty in persuading himself that the fickle jade was going to alter her habits.

During the meal Joe suggested that Mrs. Goulet should show him over the ranch.

"I've got to get back to the hotel by six," he said. "I go on then. I'll hitch up and we'll have time to drive all round the place before I start for town."

Mrs. Goulet seized upon the proposal avidly.

"That'll be fine," she agreed enthusiastically. This time there would be no thoughts of burning beef to cramp her enjoyment of Joe's company.

"You don't mind washing up, do you, Margaret?" she inquired sweetly.

When Joe drove the cutter to the door and she had taken her seat beside him, she felt elated. Here was life at last. She knew that the beautifully matched team was borrowed, that the cutter was borrowed, and that the robes were also borrowed. All of these were much too fine to be hired from a livery-barn, and Joe could not have owned such a display. He had never possessed, at one time, a hundred dollars in his life. But Mrs. Goulet did not think of all

the glory as borrowed. It belonged to Joe and was a part of him in that ecstatic moment. She was so used to scraping and pinching, to petty economies and hard living, that if anyone had suggested to her that she might buy such a team and cutter and robes, she would have been completely astounded. Such things were beyond her, so far beyond her, that she never even thought of them as possible personal possessions. But it was quite all right and fitting for Joe to have them. He was in his proper place. She felt a sensuous comfort, sitting beside his bulky figure. Life was replete for her at the moment; sweet beyond anything that she had ever known.

They crossed the bridge and drove out upon the open prairie.

"Tell me when I come to the boundary and we'll drive right round it," said Joe. "Nothing to stop us. That's one thing about winter; you can go anywhere."

Mrs. Goulet had an approximate idea only of where the boundary ran, but Joe waved her objections aside. "You know near enough where it is," he said magnificently, and so they drove completely around the ranch. Now Joe knew, theoretically, the extent of two sections of land, but he had never driven around the boundary of so extensive a holding before. It took a great deal longer than he had anticipated; but he was so carried away by his admiration that he was willing to risk being late at the hotel. At last Mrs. Goulet directed him to the ravine where the cattle were, and Joe sat regarding the animals as they nosed at the hay that Vedene, not long before, had spread for them. The herd contained nearly three hundred head, and Joe, at a rough figure, put them down as worth, young and old, thirty dollars each. Mentally he made the multiplication and the result made him feel more than ever that fate was about to play tricks with him. This was altogether too much like a fairy tale. And as the cutter stood there, still for a moment, so that the cattle should not be disturbed, Joe travelled in imagination around the boundary of the land again. The whole thing seemed

stupendous, as if the door of a vault piled with gold had opened. At last he gasped in a quiet, awe-struck tone:

"What's it all worth?"

Mrs. Goulet was not awe-stricken at all. She was so used to the ranch that the drive would have bored her had Joe not been at her side.

"I don't know," she replied, a little resentful that he should be thinking so deeply of the ranch, yet with a certain amount of pride. "No one ain't put a price on it. And I ain't figgering on selling anyway."

"Of course not," Joe agreed hastily. "What would you want to sell for? You've got a great living here, and more, and you could keep twice the cattle that's here."

"Yes, there's lots more hay we could put up," she agreed, pleased that he had seen so quickly the possibilities of the ranch. "All it needs is someone with the get up and git to go after it."

As she spoke she had a vision of herself married to Joe, of a big house overlooking the lake; of the herd doubled or trebled, and of herself mistress of three or four hired men. Her heart warmed toward Joe through whom all these things were to come to pass. She looked up at him with her dreams in her eyes.

"All it needs is someone with the pep," she said.

Joe was too staggered by the contemplation of so much potential and actual wealth to be his usual self. He thought aloud:

"There's talk in town that MacKenzie and Mann are going to build a railroad somewhere through here; somewhere between here and town. When they do, God knows what this place is going to be worth. Thousands of dollars!"

Mrs. Goulet had never met anyone who stirred her so, but that the ranch would be worth thousands of dollars aroused no other feeling in her than a greater pride in its possession. The more valuable it became, the more precious it was to keep.

"Oh, Joe!" she breathed. "That'll make it all the nicer to have!"

"It would buy a hotel!" he murmured.

"Buy a hotel!" Mrs. Goulet exclaimed. She had never thought of herself as living in town. Particularly it had never occurred to her to regard herself as the possible owner of such an establishment as an hotel. The idea was overwhelming; prodigious. Nothing to do but dress herself and have people to wait upon her! Money flowing in all the time! Then in another second, she thought of the pain of parting with the ranch.

"I'd rather have the ranch," she said conclusively, but she loved Joe for awakening her to a sense of her own riches.

"Oh, well," said Joe, "of course you wouldn't have all the money if you did sell. Some of it would belong to your daughter."

"Eh!" cried Mrs. Goulet.

"Didn't you know that?" queried Joe, surprised at the change in her. "If a man dies and leaves no will, then the law says that each kid shall have so much, and the widow shall have so much. I guess, as there is only the two of you, that you'll get about half, and the girl'll get half. Somewhere about that anyway. I'll find out from the lawyer if you like."

"No, don't!" she cried, almost incapable of speech. Her heart seemed to have stopped beating. The malignity blazing in her eyes frightened Joe.

"I guess we'd better be getting back," he said. He turned the horses and drove toward the house.

"Half of it would be fine," he said. "Wouldn't I like it!" But there was no answer.

CHAPTER XV

SEVERAL days passed before Mrs. Goulet emerged from the welter of distress into which she had been thrown by the information that Margaret was legally entitled to a share of the ranch. All her old passions were aroused. She imagined the house across the creek going up, and made up her mind to have the logs already there destroyed. She ordered Vedene to cover them with hay, and to throw two or three loads over the foundations and to set fire to them.

To Vedene the uncompleted building was sacred to the memory of Goulet.

"Surely you ain't going to burn the whole thing, are you?" he asked.

"I ain't; ain't I? That's just what I am going to do! I'd burn it up even if there was twice as much of it as there is! I'd burn it up if it took all the hay on the place!"

There was nothing more to be said. The hay was hauled, and then fired. It took five loads before the thick logs were entirely consumed.

Mrs. Goulet was openly and fiercely exultant. With the burning of the foundations of the house she felt that she had triumphed.

The next day she went to see her brother. She reached his shack just after eleven in the morning. As she had anticipated, Stephen was not at home. To pass the time she went over the ideas that had occurred to her, arranging them in some kind of order. She must have sat there for an hour before her brother appeared, and it was not in Mrs. Goulet's nature to concentrate upon one line of thought for so long a period. Naturally a very clean woman, the state of the shack offended her.

Apparently Stephen had not used a broom for weeks. Ashes from the two stoves and chips of wood littered the floor. The boards were black and coated with grease, particularly around the table; near the walls the floor was quite clean by comparison. Upon a broken-backed chair was a pan containing dirty dishes, which had evidently been used over and over again until their condition had become too filthy for even Stephen's strong stomach. Upon the table, destitute of even a covering of oil-cloth, were brown rings that marked where cups had stood. A plate, turned upside down, was on the table. Mrs. Goulet could see that the bottom of it had been used and then wiped dry with a piece of bread; a few crumbs adhered to it still. She picked the plate up gingerly and turned it over. As she surmised, the other side was beyond the power of a piece of bread to clean.

Mice came up through a hole in the floor and attacked the crumbs that had fallen during Stephen's morning meal. Mrs. Goulet was not particularly sensitive. In the course of her life, and especially during her younger days when she had followed the trail with her parents, she had learned not to be too fastidious, but her brother's shack disgusted her.

A cheap alarm clock, hanging to a nail over the bed, marked the hour of twelve. Soon after, Macdonald came in. He was surprised to see his sister.

"Hallo, Susan!" he greeted cheerily. "What's happened to you? Thought you'd quit me."

Mrs. Goulet regarded him dourly, and he wished that he had not spoken so lightly.

"Some place you keep here!" she observed.

Stephen glanced around as if surveying the interior of his dwelling for the first time, but could see nothing untoward in its appearance.

"Well, what's wrong with it?" he inquired with an injured air.

"What's wrong with it!" repeated Mrs. Goulet in contempt. "You're a bum!"

"Here! You cut out the rough stuff!" Stephen exploded. "You needn't come here if you don't want to. I didn't ask you to come. You stay away as long as it suits you. Why don't you keep away?"

"Because I ain't going to keep away!" Mrs. Goulet replied defiantly. "You've only got about three loads of hay a day to haul and yet you let the place get like this. Look at those plates; look at the table; look at the floor; look at your blankets; look at the whole business. You're a bum!" she concluded vindictively.

Macdonald glanced at each of the things in turn as his sister mentioned them. When she finished, he went to the cook-stove and raked the ashes from the fire-box.

"I ain't got no time to monkey with the damned house-work," he growled.

"You're a bum!" said Mrs. Goulet again.

"Why the hell do you stay here if it don't suit you?" thundered the exasperated Stephen.

"Don't you talk to me like that or I'll fix you," she threatened, working off the passion generated during her waiting. "I'll fix you!" she repeated. "I won't come again, and you won't get any hay, and that'll put a crimp in you."

"Oh, cut it out!" said Stephen.

"You're a regular breed," said Mrs. Goulet. "There's nothing to you?"

"Did you come over here to tell me that?" snapped Stephen. "If you did, you needn't have gone to so much trouble."

"No wonder Margaret wouldn't have you!" continued Susan in a pitying tone. "No wonder! She could see what you are!"

"I ain't worrying about Margaret. She can go to hell."

"No, you ain't worrying about Margaret right now, but you're a-going to."

"Oh, quit it! Are you going to start that again?"

"I'm not. But you are!"

Stephen looked up from his task of shaving kindling.

"I thought that was all off. I don't have to bother with her now that the old man's dead. You're got the ranch, and you can do what you like with it. What do we have to bother about the girl for?"

"That's what we thought, but we thought wrong. Joe says that when a man dies without making a will the property is divided between the widow and the children. It ain't all mine!"

Stephen dropped his wood and stood staring at her.

"God! We're in it again!" he gasped. Then another thought flashed through his brain. "Maybe Joe's a liar?"

"Maybe Joe ain't. He offered to find out from the lawyer all about it, but I told him not to. We don't want no lawyers mixed up in it."

Stephen agreed with that. To his mind lawyers and the law as represented by the mounted police went together.

"Does Margaret know?"

"No, she don't," snapped Susan. "She don't know; but sooner or later she's a-going to know."

"I don't see what you're going to do to stop her," said Steve.

"You wouldn't, a bum like you," remarked Mrs. Goulet pleasantly. "I didn't expect you to. You've got to get her, that's all!"

"I don't see how that's going to help. She'll get to know just the same."

"Let her find out when she's married to you! She's welcome to know then. What's she going to do? You wouldn't let her build or divide the farm, not while I'm alive, would you?"

Her words revealed possibilities to Stephen that he had not thought of till then. His expression betrayed him.

"You would, would you!" Mrs. Goulet exclaimed. "You'd better not! Don't get trying to double cross me!"

"Who's thinking about double crossing you?" demanded Stephen, but she was unconvinced.

"You'd better not," she warned again. "I'll fix you some way."

Stephen knew that it was no idle threat.

"All right! Quit talking about it," he cried with a show of impatience. "What do you want me to do? You know already she won't have me."

"You've still got it in your mind to double cross me," she accused shrilly. "You can't fool me!" Then she offered him an alternative. "You can give me a note for five thousand dollars. If you won't, I'll marry Joe and I'll cut out giving you any hay and that'll fix you. Give me the note and you'll hear no more about it while you go straight. If you don't, I'll come on you."

"And supposing she won't have me?"

"You can have your note."

"And how are you going to make it out?" asked Macdonald cunningly. "I don't know how to write and you don't."

"I'll get Joe to do it and let Vedene witness it. He won't know what it's for. He'll just think. Let him think. A lot of good it'll do him."

"All right," agreed Stephen. "Go to it, I don't give a damn. She won't have me anyway."

"She won't, won't she!" Mrs. Goulet got up and began to pace the floor. "She won't, won't she! Well, we'll see about that. You've been too rough with her. You've scared her. You want to go easy."

"Easy!" Stephen exclaimed scornfully. "Oh, hell! I've done all I could."

"I can just see you doing it!" retorted Mrs. Goulet. "I can just see you! And look her, you bum! If you don't get her, d'you know that's going to happen to you anyway?"

"How should I?" Macdonald sullenly inquired, wondering what his fearful relative was about to inflict upon him now.

"You'll get her or you'll get no more hay. D'you get me? You either get her or I'll fix you anyway. You ain't half tried!"

"I don't know how to try no more," replied Stephen dejectedly. "I just plumb scare her all the time, or else she laughs at me."

"I'll teach her to laugh!" exclaimed Mrs. Goulet. "But I'll treat her right at home. I know she'll soften right up. She wants all the time to be friends. And I'll send her here every day it ain't storming so that you can get after her. And you can come up at night, and we'll wear her down."

Macdonald was decidedly uncomfortable. Her programme was too strenuous for his fancy.

"How am I going to get up there every night?" he ejaculated. "Ain't I got my chores to do?"

"Well, you needn't bother in the evening," conceded Mrs. Goulet. "I'll send her every day. You can stop using that condensed milk. She'll bring you milk from now on."

CHAPTER XVI

Wondering how Macdonald had come to owe such an amount as five thousand dollars, Vedene affixed his signature as witness to the note that Mrs. Goulet demanded from her brother.

"Holy Mackerel!" ejaculated Francet. "Five thousand dollars! You'll never pay that, Steve! You're stuck for ever!"

Macdonald did not answer. He appeared to be dazed. He had made a cross and managed to get his fingers inky; he looked at them ruefully. Things in general were as black as his fingers.

Mrs. Goulet answered Vedene. Her face was set and grim, yet expressed a certain amount of assurance. She snapped decisively:

"You look after your own business! And you needn't go bawling around everywhere about the note."

"I'm not the only one that knows about it," suggested Vedene. "Joe knows about it. He witnessed it too."

"Don't you worry about Joel! If it gets out it'll be through you."

At the first opportunity Vedene told Margaret about the note.

"A note? For five thousand dollars!"

"And he really don't owe nothing."

"What on earth is it for? What can it mean?"

"It means there's something up," said Vedene. "There's something, though what it is, has got me guessing."

"I don't know, I'm sure," Margaret said, cudgelling her brain for an explanation. "He can't owe her anything."

Mrs. Goulet kept her part of the bargain with Macdonald. She was more kind to Margaret than was her wont; but

as the weeks went by and she saw that her brother made no progress in his love-making, her patience began to wear thin. The breaking point came one day, when on going to the barn to call Vedene, she overheard him talking to Margaret:

" a neive to think you'd have him!"

Then the girl's voice: "He's quite funny sometimes. Yesterday he said: 'Ain't you ever going to have me?' So I said: 'Well, now that you've mentioned it, I think, perhaps, I may some day.' Then I was sorry I'd said it, because he became quite excited, and asked, 'When?' 'When you're an old, old man,' I told him, and that made him mad. 'You're just making a fool of me,' he said, 'that's all!' And when I laughed, he said: 'You think you're smart, but I tell you you've got to come through some day!'"

"He said that, did he?"

"Yes. Fancy marrying him! A half-breed! A dirty half-breed!"

The girl's accents conveyed her disgust. Under the circumstances there could be no doubt to whom she referred.

Mrs. Goulet returned to the house without completing the mission for which she had left it. For a time she was bereft of coherent thought, her rage was so great. Margaret's words filled her brain to the exclusion of everything else. Gradually, however, she became more calm. Apart altogether from the scheme she had entered into with Macdonald, she resolved that the girl should marry the "half-breed," if she could make her. The ranch seemed less important to her, than that she should humble Margaret. At length she came to a decision, and paid her brother another visit.

Before breakfast the following morning, she said to Margaret: "Steve's sick. You and me'll go over there this evening."

"He didn't seem sick when I saw him yesterady. What's wrong with him?"

"How should I know!" retorted Mrs. Goulet sharply. "Got a cold, I suppose."

"I hope he isn't very bad."

"I don't know how bad he is. I'm going to send Vedene down this afternoon to feed his stock. We can go later."

"But Francet won't be able to do it all—feed here and at Steve's too."

"He's got to, and that's all there is to it," declared Mrs. Goulet. "He'll have to hustle for once. You and me can do the chores here."

"But what about Joe and his friends coming to-night? What shall we do with them?" Margaret inquired, in the hope that her step-mother had forgotten the proposed visit and would now abandon her project of going to Macdonald.

"I ain't forgot their coming! I ain't forgetting anything. We'll have to do the best we can for **one** night. It won't take us long if we go in the cutter."

"Couldn't we manage to go this afternoon?"

"No. I'm going to bake. We'll go this evening."

Margaret looked at her step-mother in surprise. She was not in the habit of neglecting Joe, who was becoming very confident in his attitude and more and more objectionable.

When Vedene carried the morning's milk to the milk-house, Margaret followed and told him of Stephen's sickness.

"Umph!" Vedene grunted doubtfully. "Umph!"

"When you go over there this afternoon see if he really is too sick to work. It's too bad that you should have to do all his work."

"You bet I will!" exclaimed Vedene.

Just before dusk he returned, from feeding Macdonald's cattle and Margaret asked him what he had observed.

"He was lying on the bed and said he felt like hell, but I ain't so sure, though he looked a bit pale."

Joe and his friends arrived shortly afterward. The friends proved to be two of his poker-playing companions and Margaret heard the clink of bottles as they came in.

She was, therefore, not sorry to get away from their company for a time.

Directly after supper Mrs. Goulet and Margaret set out on their errand. The days were lengthening now, and the sky was still grey, although the moon was up and a few stars were visible.

"Are you going to stay long?" asked Margaret, when they were on their way.

"You seem anxious," said Mrs. Goulet suspiciously. "I guess we ain't. It depends on how Steve is."

"Francet doesn't think he's very sick. He talked to him."

"Never mind what Francet thinks! He thinks a whole lot too much!"

Margaret noticed that the bells had been removed from the horses' harness. The girl wondered at their absence.

"Why are the bells off the harness?" she inquired.

"I'm sick of 'em."

Sleigh-bells still reminded Margaret of her father's funeral. She was not sorry they were gone. "It seems better to be quiet," she agreed.

Mrs. Goulet tied the horses to a post of the corral not far from Macdonald's shack, but she did not unhitch them from the cutter. She took the blankets from the back of the seat and threw them over the animals, remarking: "They'll be warm enough with them on." Margaret noticed that hay had been thrown upon the snow as if someone had known that a team was going to be tied there.

"I wonder who put the hay down?" she ventured.

"Just fell off a load, I guess," replied Mrs. Goulet, but Margaret wondered how a load of hay had come to pass that particular spot.

There was no light in Macdonald's window. "He ain't well enough to get up at any rate," said Mrs. Goulet as she and the girl went to the door. A thin column of smoke issued from the chimney, but otherwise there was nothing to show that anyone was in the shack, and in the fast fading light the lonely building seemed forbidding. Mrs.

Goulet, however, appeared to be quite insensible to any such impression. She opened the door and stood with the handle in her hand while Margaret entered, then pulled it to. It was inky dark inside. Less familiar with the room than her step-mother, Margaret dared not move.

"Steve!" called Mrs. Goulet. "Are you asleep? Where d'you keep the lamp?"

"Hallo! Hallo!" came Steve's voice from the other end of the room. There was a creaking of springs as he moved on the bed. "That you, Susan? I've been asleep, I guess."

"Who d'you think it is?" Mrs. Goulet inquired graciously. "Where's your lamp?"

"On the shelf beside the door. Look out you don't knock it over, fumbling around."

Margaret heard the sound of her step-mother's groping fingers; a clink as her ring touched the glass of the lamp.

"I ain't got no matches."

"They're right beside the lamp."

There was the scratch of a match and a moment afterward Mrs. Goulet applied the flame to the wick of the lamp which was of the cheapest kind. She left it upon the shelf, so that only a faint light fell upon the bed. Stephen was staring at Margaret as if he were afraid of her. She saw him pull at the clothes, drawing them closely about his neck.

"Well, how are you now?" inquired Mrs. Goulet.

"I dunno. Guess I ain't so rotten!" stammered Stephen.

"What are you in bed for then? Just a fit of laziness?"

"Aw, cut it out!" snarled Stephen. "You ought to feel like I do. You'd know something then."

"What did you say you was all right for then?" demanded his sister irritably. "If you ain't sick, d'you think I want to come monkeying around here when I've got visitors?"

"I didn't ask you to come," defended Stephen. "But I guess I'm pretty sick at that."

"You do, do you? What's wrong with you?"

"Me throat's sore, and I ache all over."

Mrs. Goulet sat down in the one good chair.

"You'd better find a seat, Margy," she said. "We ain't going to stay in this dump long, but you might as well make yourself as comfortable as you can. Put the pan down off that chair and sit on that."

"I notice you ain't cleared up much," she observed, turning to her brother again.

Stephen ignored her remark, and asked: "What did you come for, Margy?"

"Mother wanted me to."

Margaret thought Macdonald reddened as he turned to his sister.

"She don't want to stay," he said. "Let her go."

"What does she want to go for?" snapped Mrs. Goulet vindictively. "She'll go when I go and not before."

"Oh, hell!" exclaimed Macdonald wearily, turning away so that he faced the wall. His manner was so peculiar that Margaret felt sorry for him.

"I didn't mind coming," she said. "It's all right, Steve."

For half an hour Mrs. Goulet carried on an intermittent conversation. Then she appeared to grow restless.

"Let's clear up a bit while we're here," she suggested. "Take off your coat, Margy, and sweep the floor. Show this dirty breed how to be clean for once!"

Margaret started in surprise, wondering at her step-mother using a term she had used herself only the previous day. Mrs. Goulet's eyes were shining.

"He's a dirty breed, ain't he?" she inquired mockingly. Now that she was on the verge of triumph she could hardly hold her temper.

"I wouldn't say that," Margaret replied.

"No? Well now! You wouldn't, eh?" She turned and walked to the window.

"Listen!" she exclaimed. "That team's moving. I'll see what they're doing," and dashed to the door, opened it and banged it to after her.

There was the turn of a key in the lock, then silence. Margaret exclaimed, looking in amazement at Macdonald:

"Why, she locked the door!"

Stephen did not answer, and with something approaching panic, Margaret rushed to the door and shook the handle violently.

"Mother! Mother!" she called, but there was no answer.

At the window it was too dark to see anything, but the girl thought she could hear the sound of a sleigh moving, and the muffled thud of horses' feet in the snow. She rapped at the window, not with much force at first, but as her panic grew, frantically.

"Here! Cut that out!" ordered Macdonald. "Do!"

Margaret paid no attention to him.

"Mother! Mother!" she shouted in terror.

Stephen laughed. It was hardly a laugh, more of an awkward snigger, as if he were ashamed of laughing outright. Margaret turned from the window, realizing the uselessness of what she was doing, and faced him. She saw then that the blankets with which Macdonald had been covered had slipped. The braces of his overalls were revealed, and she realized that he was dressed, and that she had been deliberately trapped.

Stephen would not meet her eyes as she stared at him, horrified at her predicament.

"I wouldn't get bawling for her," he said. "She ain't a-coming."

"Open the door!" Margaret demanded, imperiously. "Open it at once. I'm not going to stay here!"

Macdonald swung his legs out of the bed but remained seated upon it.

"Don't get sore," he said in what was meant to be a soothing tone. "It won't do you any good. You ain't scared of men, are you?"

"I should say not!" Margaret retorted. Strangely enough her declaration gave her confidence, and she became calmer. "Why should I be afraid of him?" she thought, then recollected what had happened on the night of the fire; she had not been able to master him then. She resolved to be more careful now; would see that he did not

get close enough to grip her. She was able, however, to keep her doubts from appearing in her face, and to assume her usual confident bearing, knowing that that was her best, and indeed her only protection.

"You'd better sit down and take it easy," suggested Macdonald. "You've got to stay, so you might as well make yourself comfortable."

Margaret took up her coat and thrust her arms into it.

Stephen left the bed and pushed the single good chair toward her.

"You needn't put that on," he said, grinning. "Here, sit down," and he dragged the broken-backed chair near the heater for himself. The light from the lamp now fell upon his face and Margaret could see that his pallor was the result of a coating of white powder. As it was evident that he had no intention of opening the door she took the chair.

"You'd better wipe that flour off your face," she suggested, making a guess at the nature of the powder. "You look silly."

Sheepishly, Stephen pulled a rag from his pocket and wiped his face.

"I'm glad it's over," he said, and Margaret could see that he was really relieved.

"Glad what's over?"

"Oh, that part of it. Lying there, and pretending to be sick."

"You've been pretending all along then?"

"Well, you can see I ain't sick, can't you? There's no use pretending any more."

"No," agreed Margaret, "there isn't. And what has it all been for?"

Macdonald twisted uncomfortably on his chair.

"Don't you get worrying about it so much," he said at last. He sliced some tobacco from a plug, filled his pipe and began to smoke, puffing solemnly.

"You've brought it all on yourself," he said, when his pipe was well alight. "You wouldn't have anything to do

with me like Susan wanted you to. And now you're fixed."

"But I'm not!" replied Margaret in her boldest manner.

"I'm not. I'm going when you open that door for me."

Stephen laughed outright at that. "You're going when I open it is right!" he declared. "When I open it! When!"

"But you don't want to keep me here, do you?"

Again an expression of shame flitted across his face, but he would not answer directly.

"I dunno," he grunted at last.

"You don't know, yet you are doing it. I know you don't want to keep me here. Yet that is what you are doing."

"Cut it out!" Stephen ordered. "You'd better stop it."

"If people were to get to hear what you are doing—if ever anyone were to find out, I wonder what they would do to you? This is a serious thing. The police would be after you if they got to know that you kept me here against my will."

"But who's going to tell 'em?" he demanded, tauntingly.

"I could tell."

"You!" he sneered. "You won't want to tell anybody. You'll want to keep quiet by the time you get out of here."

Margaret felt her terror mounting, but forced her voice to a calmness she was far from feeling.

"But there's Francet," she protested. "He won't keep quiet."

"A fat lot he'll do! And he won't tell."

"You know he will."

"I know he won't! And you'll be the one to tell him not to. You won't want to go blurting around all over the place that you stayed here all night. He'll shut up, I'll bet!" Stephen ceased speaking abruptly, as if afraid he was saying too much, but finished: "That's all been figgered out."

"So you intend to keep me all night?"

"I ain't saying anything," cried Stephen, exasperated at the quantity of information he had already given. "I ain't saying anything. I don't want to have anything to do with it!"

"But you are having something to do with it," she pointed out, perceiving a possible avenue of escape in his wavering.

"You ain't got no one but yourself to blame," Stephen continued miserably. "Why don't you do what she wants? If we were to get married, I wouldn't bother you any. I don't want you very bad and you don't want me, and that's the truth. But if we was to get married, it would be all right with Susan. Why don't you?"

"Because I will not!" There was no mistaking the finality in the girl's tone.

"All right. You won't let me do the square thing by you."

"The square thing!"

"Well, have it your own way," with a shrug of his shoulders. "She'll get you anyway."

"No she won't! She's forgotten Joe. He and two other men came just before supper. They'll know. They'll know she brought me here. They'll tell."

"They will! Like fun they will! Susan figgered on them. She wanted them there as witnesses that you had been here all night if you cut up rough. That's why she was in such a rush to pull it off to-day. There's only your word that I kept you. Susan'll say that you wanted to stay. Joe and his bunch saw you go, and they know you went with Susan willingly enough. There's only you to say that it's all wrong. Just you against the bunch of us. She's got you all ways, hog-tied and thrown!"

At this revelation of the trap she was in, and from which she could see no escape unless she could prevail upon Macdonald to open the door, the girl was dazed.

"Oh, Steve!" she cried. "If you'll let me go I'll—I'll——"

"You'll what?"

"I don't know!" she cried. "I don't know! I can't think. It's too terrible! Let me go, Steve, and I'll say nothing about it to anyone."

Steve shook his head. "I daren't," he confessed. "I'd like too, but I daren't!"

The girl straightened in her seat and taunted him:

"Why, you're afraid of her, Steve! You're more afraid of her than I am! You're more afraid of her than Francet is, and you're a big, strong man! You're a coward, Steve!"

"Here! You cut that out!"

"You're a coward! A coward!! A coward!!!"

"If you don't cut it out I'll tie a sack over your head!"

"Don't you dare put a finger on me!" she cried. "Don't you dare!" There was a high hysterical note in her voice that alarmed him.

"Well, keep quiet then," he growled. "I ain't no coward, but that there step-mother of yours had got me just about as bad as she's got you. I'm so tied up, I ain't got a kick left in me! I wish the whole thing was in hell!"

"Oh, Steve!" she cried. "That doesn't help us. Think what this means to me. You don't want to hurt me! I can see you don't! Think what a dreadful thing this is! What a terrible thing! Oh, you must be afraid of her!" Macdonald leaned his head upon his hands miserably and his fingers rumpled his hair.

He groaned.

"You have a key, Steve, haven't you? Please open the door and let me go. It will be done in a moment, and you'll feel ever so much better. You don't want to keep me here!"

At her passionate pleading Steve raised his tortured eyes to her.

"She's got me, I tell you!" he cried. "If I let you go, she'll fix me, and it won't help you any. She'll get you some way!"

"Don't think about that now, Steve," Margaret cajoled. "Just open the door and we can fight it out with her later."

But Macdonald shook his head hopelessly.

"Nothing doing," he announced. "She's got us."

Margaret abandoned hope of Stephen releasing her then. It was replaced, however, by a desperate resolve to find a way of escape for herself. Steve was resting his head upon his hands again. He had apparently sunk beneath the weight of his troubles, but Margaret knew that troubles did not affect him very deeply. To-morrow or the day after he would forget all about it. He was true to his breeding. Her gaze wandered restlessly about the shack searching for a possible means of escape.

The window! She wondered why she had not thought of it before. It was the only way. But how could she get out? The frame was not very large and the bottom of it was higher from the floor than her waist. She would have to break the glass, push her chair beneath the window and get through before Macdonald could come around or leap over the table. It was impossible. For a time she abandoned the idea, and racked her brain for another way; but no other occurred to her.

Again she went over her chances of success. Fortunately she was sitting on the side of the table nearest the window, which was not more than four or five feet from her. She could smash the glass and in a few seconds be free. The idea was fascinating, irresistible.

Stealthily she stood up, watching the back of Macdonald's head with dilated eyes. If he looked up, her expression would have told him that she contemplated desperate measures; but he did not turn. With fingers trembling and almost nerveless as they closed upon the wood; Margaret gripped her chair, and with all her strength swung it at the window. There was a crash, a shower of splintered glass, a rush of cold air through the vacant frame. Margaret pushed the chair against the wall beneath the window and sprang upon the seat. But even as

her feet left the floor, she caught a glimpse of Stephen's hand upon the table as he prepared to vault it. She knew instinctively that he would catch her before she could scramble out—she had known it all along. The distance between them was too small to give her sufficient time. She turned and faced him resolutely, crying in a ringing voice:

"Don't you touch me! Don't you come across that table!"

Stephen stared at her menacingly, but made no attempt to advance. He appeared hardly to realise as yet what had happened.

"A hell of a thing you've done now!" he shouted. "We're going to freeze!"

"Don't you come near me!" Margaret cried in deadly fear of feeling his arms around her again.

"Come down off that chair!" he ordered. "D'you think you could get through that window before I'd get you? No chance!"

Because she knew that what he said was true, Margaret stepped to the floor, but she did not take her eyes from his face. Again she repeated her command:

"Don't you try to touch me! Don't come near me!"

Macdonald laughed. "You're scared, eh? You know what you ought to have. I should have tied you up. Come away from that window!"

Margaret shook her head. A wisp of brown hair blew across her white face.

"You won't, eh?" cried Stephen. "I'll make you!" He began to move around the end of the table.

The girl almost screamed in her terror; but the sound refused to come. She retreated as he advanced. Her fear emboldened the half-breed. He advanced more rapidly, having already forgotten his first intention of making her move from the window.

"I'll show you!" he threatened.

Twice they circled the table, then he dropped his hand upon it, and she realized that he was going to vault it, and

intercept her. Her last protection gone, she backed toward the door.

"I've got you now!" he cried, exultantly.

Her back was against the door; she could go no farther. Stephen was only a few feet from her, advancing as if he were going to spring upon her. Like a trapped animal the girl's eyes turned to the right and to the left in a last hopeless search for help. Her frantic gaze fell upon the lamp, standing upon its shelf almost at her hand. In a flash she had it in her grasp, and raised.

"Keep away!" she tried to scream, but the words issued only faintly from her dry throat.

Macdonald ignored her threat and continued to advance. The next instant Margaret hurled the lighted lamp at the wall above the bed. For a moment after the bowl struck the wall and burst there was darkness; then a tongue of flame appeared upon the oil-soaked bedclothes where the lighted wick had fallen, and suddenly flames were all over the bed and leaping up the wall in fierce, red, voracious tongues of fire. In another moment they were among the rafters, roaring sullenly, and the cold night air pouring through the broken window fanned them.

In the fierce light, Margaret and Macdonald stood for a few moments fascinated and powerless. The flames swept above their heads, and began to creep across the floor toward them, following the splashes of oil.

"God!" screamed Stephen at last, breaking the spell. He dashed at the door, throwing the girl aside. She saw him fumbling in his pocket for the key; but in his panic, when he found it, he could not insert it in the lock. She saw him look up at the window; but escape was already out of the question in that direction. The wall there was alight, as was also the floor beneath. Then his eyes fell upon one of the heavy, unsplit blocks of wood prepared for the heater. He dashed toward it, snatched it up and charged the door; beating at the lock with the heavy block. Thud, thud, it went, frantically, panically, and with each blow a shower of sparks filled the building. The

roof was a mass of flames when at last the door gave way. Macdonald was out in a moment, and as Margaret followed, the flames sprang hungrily after her. She did not see Stephen, but sped blindly along the familiar trail toward her home.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN Mrs. Goulet arrived home after leaving Margaret at her brother's, Francet went out to drive the cutter to the barn.

"Where's Margy?" he asked, in surprise, when he saw that she had not returned.

Mrs. Goulet did not answer at once. It was too dark for Vedene to see her expression, but he thought there was a note of uncertainty in her voice when at last she replied:

"She's going to stay there awhile."

"I won't take the harness off the horses then?"

"No. You can leave it on. I'll drive back there after a bit," and Mrs. Goulet opened the door of the house and went in.

Francet shook the lines over the impatient team. He noticed then that the bells had been removed. I wonder why she did that? he thought uneasily. It seemed strange to him that Margaret should have remained with Macdonald, especially as she had said that she never went into his shack when alone. "Funny," he thought. But as yet he had no suspicion of what had really happened. "Mrs. Goulet would hardly start anything while there's people here," he reasoned, seeking to allay his anxiety.

On his return to the house he watched Susan. Once she met his eyes, and he noticed that she was excited. She had taken a drink of the whisky the men had brought. There were four glasses on the table, while there had been only three before she arrived.

Joe and his companions were playing cards.

"Take a hand," Joe invited Mrs. Goulet. "Francet won't. He's a dead one!"

Mrs. Goulet laughed. It was louder than it should have been.

"He wouldn't," she said, "unless Margy told him to."

"How's Steve?" asked one of the men Joe had brought with him, a short man with red-rimmed eyes, a grey, wiry moustache, and stiff bristling hair. He made a living buying and selling small lots of cattle, but there was a suspicion abroad that he was not above selling whisky to the Indians.

"He's got a cold, I guess, Harry," replied Mrs. Goulet. "He's in bed, and says his throat is sore."

"We'd better take him some snorts," suggested the other of Joe's companions, a young man who followed the occupation of clerk in one of the stores in town. He looked unhealthy and thin. His hair was plastered down upon his skull and he had a long, pinched nose. Altogether he reminded one of a fox. "Golly!" he continued. "I think I'll get a cold and stay in bed if you'll send Margy to sit with me, Mrs. Goulet."

Mrs. Goulet and the three men laughed at this sally. Vedene's blood ran hot. He had taken a chair against the wall where the light from the lamp hardly reached him. He was tired and would have gone to his room only that Margaret's absence made him uneasy.

"Don't pull any of that stuff, Tom," Joe advised the clerk. "You'll get Francet mad."

The idea that their speech must be controlled because Vedene was present angered Mrs. Goulet.

"I'm the one to decide what can be said here," she snapped at Joe. "If Vedene doesn't like it, let him get out."

"You know I didn't mean it," replied Joe placatingly. "There ain't nothing been said that anyone could object to."

"I should say not," said Harry.

For an hour or more the cards and the conversation continued. Now and again the glasses were refilled. Francet wondered when Mrs. Goulet was going after Margaret. From where he sat he could not see the clock,

and he did not wish to attract attention by going to it. Apparently he was forgotten. At last he could remain quiet no longer, and crossed the floor behind the men.

Mrs. Goulet looked up at him sharply. Whisky and excitement had brought a glow to her usually colourless cheeks. Her brilliant eyes were more brilliant than ever. She laughed loudly at Vedene's action.

"Go closer to it," she mocked. "You'll be able to smell it then."

But Francet was too alarmed at the lateness of the hour to pay any attention to her jibes.

"It's past nine," he cried. "Margy ought to be home. I can drive over for her."

"She ought, ought she?" sneered Mrs. Goulet. "Well, I'm the best judge of that. You mind your own business. If she wants to stay, she can stay there as long as she likes!"

There was a guffaw of laughter from the three men at the table.

"I guess she's pretty comfortable," suggested the fox-faced clerk.

"She's enjoying herself all right," agreed Joe. "Steve's a pretty good-looker."

Vedene stood quivering, unwilling to make Margaret's stay at Macdonald's appear more important than it really was, yet almost convinced that something was wrong.

"Are you going?" he asked Mrs. Goulet.

"I'll go when I'm good and ready," she snapped. "You go to bed. If she wasn't contented to stay where she is, she would have been home long ago. She has the use of her legs."

Vedene returned to his chair. The card playing continued, and Mrs. Goulet lost, and grew more and more reckless. Francet saw, too, that she was filling her glass frequently. At last he could endure his anxiety no longer, and began to draw on his coat. Mrs. Goulet looked up. She had been waiting for him to do that for some time.

"Where are you going?"

For a moment Francet did not reply, but at last he told her:

"After Margaret."

"So you're going after her, are you? D'you think she'll thank you for that? I guess not! If she was decent she would have been home before this. She wants to stay!" She looked around at the men with a leer. "I guess she wants to stay," she repeated, and they laughed at the suggestion she conveyed. "I think I'll let her stay," she continued. "Just let her stay and see how long she is. She must be having a good time!"

Vedene stood staring at her as if deprived of his senses. This was a revelation of Mrs. Goulet's character that even he had not anticipated.

"You'd better look out!" he warned, his voice vibrating. "You'd better look out! You're a liar to say those things and you know you're a liar!"

"Sit down and let's have a look at you," jeered Mrs. Goulet. "You're in love with her yourself. Oh, she's got lots of lovers!" She laughed wildly. "Lots of lovers! Look at him, boys. He wants her himself!"

Vedene stood quivering while the men laughed and scoffed. "You're a liar!" he repeated, but only guffaws answered him. "You're all liars and cowards!"

"Look at the lover!" derided Mrs. Goulet, now past all control. "Look at him! Oh, a fat chance you've got against Steve. Ain't you sorry for yourself, you poor, crooked little runt?"

Joe and his companions thought the sport excellent.

"You don't think you can beat out Steve, do you, Francet?" Joe asked. "I don't see how you figger you can beat out a fine young feller like Steve. It ain't natural."

There was another roar of laughter at that.

"It's hell to be in love, ain't it, Francet?" goaded the cattle dealer. "Just hell! Especially when the girl is out with another feller. It ain't like as if you could

go and beat him up. There ain't enough of you for that. It's hell to be only a bit of a man and in love!"

"You're liars!" shouted Vedene. "You're all liars!" He made for the door.

"Stop him!" screamed Mrs. Goulet. "Stop him! Don't let him go and interrupt 'em!"

Joe sprang from his chair to do her bidding, placing his burly form before the door.

For a moment Vedene tensed his muscles to leap upon him, but altered his mind. He picked up a chair and swung it above his head.

"Look out!" he yelled. "Get out of there or I'll bash your head in!"

He sensed that Mrs. Goulet was advancing upon him from behind. "Stand away!" he cried again, and Joe, who was not cast in heroic mould, jumped away from the descending chair. Before Mrs. Goulet could spring upon him, Vedene was out of the door. His momentum carried him a few paces; then he stopped and gazed upward at a red glare in the sky.

"Steve's shack's alight!" he yelled, and dashed along the trail, Mrs. Goulet and the three men lumbering after him.

Nearly halfway to Macdonald's shack, Vedene met Margaret. She was staggering with exhaustion. Without a word she clung to him. He could not see the panic in her eyes.

He gasped: "What happened?"

"I'll tell you. . . . Let me rest . . . a minute!" she panted.

But before she could recover, Mrs. Goulet, Joe and his companions arrived. Mrs. Goulet stared menacingly at the girl.

"You!" she cried shrilly. "What have you been doing? Where's Steve?"

Margaret returned her step-mother's look without answering. The light reflected from the snow was sufficient to enable Mrs. Goulet to see the expression of loathing and horror on the girl's face.

"Where's Steve?" demanded Mrs. Goulet again, shaking Margaret roughly.

"Don't touch me!" the girl cried. "You're a wicked woman! I hate you! I hate you!"

Mrs. Goulet started back, recovered herself, and laughing wildly.

"The girl's mad!" she exclaimed. "She's mad, I tell you!"

"Come on, don't let's bother with her," cried Joe, impatiently. "Let's go and see where Steve is," and the four ran on up the trail toward the fire and vanished among the bluffs.

For a time neither Francet nor Margaret spoke. The girl was so exhausted that she was not fit to tell what had happened, and leaned heavily upon Francet's arm as he assisted her back to the house.

While Margaret was resting in a chair, Vedene paced up and down the kitchen. He knew that they had come to the point where something had to be done to end a life that was fast growing intolerable and obviously dangerous for Margaret. Something would have to be done! Francet saw that the girl had recovered somewhat from her distress. He inquired:

"What happened down there?"

"She pretended that something had happened to the horses and went out and locked the door. Steve wouldn't open it. She's got a hold on him some way. He didn't want to keep me, but was afraid to let me go."

"I'll fix him!" declared Vedene, and at the expression in his eyes the girl leaped to her feet and caught him by the arm.

"No!" she cried. "You mustn't do anything. That would be terrible! Isn't it bad enough already? They would take you away then, and I wouldn't have anyone left."

Francet quietened at that. "You've got to get out of here somehow," he said, fiercely. "How did the shack catch fire?"

"When Steve wouldn't open the door, I didn't know what to do. Then I thought of breaking the window and climbing out. I smashed the glass with a chair, but before I could get through, Steve came after me. I think he was going to tie me up. I backed away and found myself against the door. Steve was coming, and the lamp was on the shelf. I hardly knew what I was doing. I picked it up and threw it at the wall, and a minute afterwards the room was all on fire."

Vedene clapped his hands in glee.

"I hope he got burned!" he cried.

"He got out before I did."

"He would!" said Vedene.

"I think I hear someone—see if they are coming."

Vedene opened the kitchen door and looked along the trail.

"There's nobody in sight."

Closing the door, he said: "We've got to find some way to get you away from here. If only we had some money!"

"What could we do?" asked Margaret.

"You could go to Winnipeg. You'd get something to do there. Anything would be better than this."

Vedene resumed his pacing. In a few minutes he stopped and looked up.

"I could sell that bunch of horses of mine."

Margaret shook her head.

"You wouldn't do that surely? You would have nothing then. And they are all you are going to have to live on. She won't let you work for her when I'm gone."

Vedene paid no attention to her remonstrances.

"They're worth seventy or eighty dollars a-piece. The people coming in are making the prices of horse go up all the time. If Harry will give me fifty a-piece for 'em I'll let 'em go. He's always trading, and knows the horses, and I won't have to round 'em up for him. He'd take the whole eight. I'd just keep the two cayuses. Then you could go."

"Why, that would be four hundred dollars!" The amount seemed enormous to Margaret. "I couldn't take it."

"But you can and you will!" declared Vedene, who in spite of her protestations could see how relieved she was at the prospect of going. He had a queer sinking at his heart as he saw her eyes light up, but it did not alter his decision. He said reassuringly:

"You buck up, Margy. You're going to come out of this all right."

"But I'll have to pay you back some day!" she said. "And I'll pay back all that the horses are worth, not what you get from Harry for them."

"Oh, sure; that's all right," said Vedene bravely. "Any time'll be all right."

He approached Harry the following morning with his proposal and Harry agreed to give him fifty dollars each for the horses. He said, however, that he was short of money just then, and would pay in about two weeks. He did not return for three weeks, and still did not have the money; said he would have it in a week or ten days. The actual reason for the delay was, that Mrs. Goulet guessed that Vedene intended leaving, and did not wish him to go until the winter was over. Vedene tried to find another purchaser for the horses but without success.

CHAPTER XVIII

STEPHEN MACDONALD was in the kitchen when Margaret went to bed; he had taken up his abode with his sister after his shack was destroyed. He was almost intoxicated and there was a partly emptied bottle of whisky before him, but Mrs. Goulet paid no attention to him. As Stephen had failed to carry out her schemes she had apparently lost all interest in him. He refused to do any other work than the feeding of his own stock; went to town frequently, and nearly always returned home the worse for liquor. Joe Weatherall was a more and more frequent visitor. Usually he brought companions with him, who played cards and drank, and slept in makeshift beds on the kitchen floor, or in the room now occupied by Macdonald. Vedene went to his own shack every night. Sometimes for days at a time the house had the odour of a bar-room and echoed to coarse jokes and laughter. It was Mrs. Goulet's way of making life as miserable as possible for Margaret.

Macdonald had no reason to go near the door of Margaret's room, yet twice she heard him stealthily twist the handle. There was no key to the lock, and every night since the drinking had commenced, Margaret had barricaded herself in as well as she could, but not until now had any attempt been made to enter.

Margaret left the bed and partly dressed. Furtive sounds of scraping feet came to her at long intervals. She examined her barricade, which appeared pitifully frail to her; the back of a chair jammed beneath the lock, and the bureau drawn partly across the door. She knew that her defences would not hold Macdonald out if he were to make a determined attempt to enter; and she could do no more.

Through the window of her bedroom Margaret could see across the lake, and into the white, shadowy distance beyond. A thin crescent moon floated in the sky and the stars burned brightly. The bedroom was icy cold. It depended for warmth upon the kitchen stove; but for weeks it had been impossible for Margaret to leave her door open.

After a while she began to shiver, and crossed the room for her fur coat, which was hanging on a peg at the side of the door. As she stood buttoning the coat, her gaze fell upon the handle of the door, and her eyes grew round and dilated. The handle was moving. She had not heard a sound; did not hear a sound now, yet the handle moved. There was sufficient light reflected into the room from the polished surface of the snow to render things easily visible, and she knew that she was not mistaken.

Then, as she watched, she saw the chair beneath the lock tilt slightly and creak with the pressure upon it. She stood fascinated, spell-bound; knowing that it was of no use to scream. There was no help at hand. Mrs. Goulet would not interfere. Probably she was awake and listening. Margaret pushed against the bureau with all her strength. Slowly the door yielded to her pressure and closed. There was a snap as the latch caught, and a faint snigger of laughter from the kitchen. The chair, all that had really saved her, had moved slightly and she replaced it in its original position.

For a time she felt so weak that she could hardly totter to the bed. Her knees wavered beneath her and icy shivers crept through her veins. After what seemed a long time, she heard Macdonald walk across the kitchen floor; the outer door open and close.

A new terror came to her now. Supposing he should come to the window? For a moment in her panic, she thought of removing her barricade from the door so that she would be able to escape from the room, but hesitated. Stephen might not think of the window, and if she cleared the door, and he were to return to the kitchen she would be helpless to keep him out.

There was nothing at hand to use as a weapon. Absolutely nothing. She had not thought of such a thing. Then a row of boots against the wall caught her attention. Swiftly she picked up one with a high heel, one she used for riding. She gripped it by the toe, and stood poised beside the window. Nothing happened. Two or three times she raised her boot aloft but the cause of her alarm was only clouds floating across the sky. Then she heard Macdonald return. He reeled about the kitchen; bumping against the walls; came closer and closer, and at last, fell against the door.

"You're awake, aren't you, Margy?" he asked in a thick voice.

She did not answer.

"You can't fool me!" he cried. "I know you're listening all right. Come out and have a drink, and be a good fellow. We don't care for the old woman!"

Still she would not answer.

"I'll come in and fetch you!" Macdonald threatened. "You'd better come out! You ain't afraid of your old pal, are you?"

Silence alone was his answer.

"I'm a-coming!" he yelled, breaking into wild, drunken laughter. The girl saw the handle turn, and threw herself against the door. Slowly, in spite of all she could do, it was forced inward. The back of the chair creaked and the bureau began to slide across the floor. "He's in!" she thought. "He's in!" But as she abandoned hope, there came a crash and Macdonald rolled upon the kitchen floor, while he cursed and swore in drunken rage.

Margaret jammed the chair back under the lock, pushed the bureau against the door, and ran to the window, which she vainly tried to raise. It was frozen down. She struck the frame a blow with the heel of the boot, and, once loosened in its socket, the window raised easily enough. As she scrambled out, she heard her step-mother shrilly abusing Macdonald, and the oaths of which his reply consisted. A moment afterward she was on the ground.

She crept around the house, fearful that the sound of crunching snow would alarm Macdonald or Mrs. Goulet; fearful, too, that Macdonald would break into her room and find her gone before she was well away. She ran across the open spaces and used the various buildings as cover. At the barn, she hesitated. She could saddle a horse in a few minutes or mount one without a saddle, but if Macdonald or Mrs. Goulet were to discover her absence, the first place they would search would be the barn. She dared not take the risk, and continued on foot.

The warm days had made the trail slippery. In her haste to put as great a distance as possible between herself and the house, Margaret often stumbled. The snow had sank on both sides of the path, and to walk upon it was like balancing oneself upon an ice-coated tight-rope. Strange night sounds came to her. She had a feeling of being watched by unseen eyes. There were furtive and stealthy movements in the underbush, and the bluffs she knew so well, seemed strange and forbidding—they were like smears and blots upon a sheet of white paper.

It was a steady climb to Vedene's shack and she reached it breathless. Even the tiny building had a strange appearance. It had never seemed so quiet, or so forlorn and deserted to her before. She had difficulty in making herself realize that Francet was there.

"Francet!" she called quiveringly, her tone betraying the tension she was under. "Francet!"

He answered almost immediately.

"That you, Margy?" There was no tone of sleepiness in the voice. It sounded so wide-awake that one could imagine that he had been waiting for her to call.

"Let me in," she demanded impatiently. She heard him leave his bed and strike a match. Light appeared in the window.

"Cover your window," she called. "They can see the light from the house."

There was a patter of bare feet across the floor, then the window was darkened.

"Just a minute," said Vedene.

It did not occur to either of them that the proprieties were in any way outraged. It was quite natural to him that she should come if she was in trouble, just as it was natural for her to seek him. Their attitude was characteristic of the peculiar relationship that existed between them. So far as Margaret was concerned Vedene stood almost in the place of her dead father. When Francet opened the door, she entered slowly, almost overcome by fatigue, and drew a chair close to the heater. Her weariness and impatience made her unjust.

"You were a long time opening the door, Francet," she complained.

"No longer than I could help," he defended, looking down at her. "What's happened now?"

"Steve was drunk——"

"I know he was. Pretty bad. And he had another bottle that he hadn't opened when I left."

"I was afraid and couldn't sleep. He tried to come—to come into my room."

"What!"

The forward thrust of Vedene's head made the hump upon his back appear monstrous. His abnormally long arms, altogether out of proportion to his height, were bent at the elbows, and his long, thin fingers were outstretched. His usually sallow face went white; but while Margaret looked at him, the blood came back into his cheeks, flushing them a deep red, making more apparent and startling the livid scar across his brow. The quiet and ingenuous expression had gone from his eyes. They were narrowed and gleamed viciously.

"God!" he muttered.

Margaret shook her head. Not even Francet's vehemence could shake from her the lassitude that held her, now that the stress of her experience was over and she was safe.

"It's no good, Francet. You could do nothing. He would only laugh at you. And it's not his fault really.

She must have been awake. She could have stopped him. He called out to me just before I climbed through the window. Steve's only a poor miserable fool, and she has made him what he is."

"Curse him! I'd like to get him by the neck and choke the life out of him!"

"It's no good thinking about that, Francet. It wouldn't do any good."

"But I'd like to do it," Francet growled vindictively. "I'd like to do it! I could curse myself. God knows why I was made as I am!"

"Don't worry about that, Francet. I'd rather have you just as you are. You don't know how nice it is to be here and to feel quite safe and quiet. This is the first time I've been able to rest for a long while. I've been so tired and miserable." Her eyes stared straight before her, wide open as if she were not able to relax. "It's been terrible, Francet!"

"You're safe enough now. They wouldn't start anything here. I'll make up the cook-stove and get you some coffee." As usual he forgot his own troubles when Margaret was distressed. "Some coffee will fix you all right."

"No, don't bother, Francet. I don't want any. I just want to be quiet, that's all. It's so nice to sit here quietly."

"I'll shake up the heater then. It's cold in here now."

He shook the grate till fiery particles began to fall, then threw blocks of wood into the stove. "That'll soon be going good." He drew his chair close to the table so that he would be near Margaret and be able to watch her face. His eyes were steadily getting worse, though their failure was so gradual he did not notice it. The face of a person across the room appeared to him as if covered by a fine mist that rendered features and expression indistinct. It was as if he saw things through a spider's web. "I'll go into town to-morrow and see if I can get that money

for the horses from Harry," he said. "You'll be able to get away then."

She did not turn toward him but he could see alarm come into her eyes again. For a few moments she hesitated, then said:

"I hate to think of going. When you first spoke about going it didn't seem so bad. I had not thought about it. But I have since. I've thought and thought, and with that and all the other things—I I don't know what to do. I'm afraid!"

"Here, Margy, don't get like that," entreated Francet. "You're all scared now. When you get away and get rested it won't be so bad." He leaned over and took her hand. "Buck up, Margy."

"I've thought and I've thought of it. I shan't know any place to go, and Winnipeg is such a big city. I don't know a soul, and there's nothing I can do. The thought of going there scares me—yet I'm scared to stay." She stopped and turned to him. He could see that an inspiration had come to her. "You come too, Francet," she said eagerly, as if quite sure that she had found a solution of her difficulties. "You come too. Then it will be all right—I wouldn't be afraid then."

Francet shook his head. "We couldn't do that."

"Why not?" impetuously. "You can go. Surely you don't want to stay here now? And she won't keep you working for her anyway. She'll get someone else. I know she will, even if she has to pay twice or three times the money she is paying you."

"'Tain't that," replied Vedene shaking his head again. "I'm going anyway when you've gone. I don't know where, but I'm going. But we can't go together."

"Why not?"

Vedene got up and shambled up and down the room, seeking for words to explain, yet having difficulty in finding them. Margeret followed him with her eyes.

"Why?" she asked again, at last.

"Can't you see?" he cried. "I'm a man and you're a girl. We can't go together!"

"But you and I? . . . Why?" She looked at him as if bewildered.

"'Cause they'll say things about you. They'd say things everywhere we went. They'd say 'em here if we went together. I'll bet you that Steve and your mother would start talking right now if they knew you were here. They'd be liars and they'd know they were liars, but they would talk just the same." He stopped at the thrust of a new thought.

"Perhaps you'd better go now," he suggested. "She'd say anything just to hurt you, and once talk got started there'd be no stopping it. We can talk things over to-morrow when I get back from town. I'll go early."

Margaret shook her head emphatically.

"I'm not going," she replied. "I won't go. You're crazy! If she was to say things like that about you here, people would think she was silly and laugh at her. No one would believe her. I'm not going!" She began to throw off her coat, forgetting that she was only partly dressed. The cold air striking her bare shoulders quickly reminded her of the fact, however, and she hastily drew the coat on again.

But Vedene had noticed her movement. For the moment he was lost in his own reflections which were as bitter as gall. He could see that Margaret did not think of him as a man. She could not conceive that to be found in his company in the middle of the night would harm her. In one way he felt relieved, in another he felt abashed, as if the girl had thrown him from a pedestal upon which he had improperly placed himself. He had sought to count himself among men, and Margaret had shown him that she did not consider him one.

"I guess it's all right," he admitted, "that part of it. No one would take any notice of you being here."

"Of course they wouldn't!" she agreed quite unconscious of how the words hurt him.

"But they would if we went away together."

"You're silly," she exclaimed, smiling incredulously. "They would just think I was your daughter. I would have to change my name, that's all. I would have to be Margaret Vedene. Then they wouldn't know a thing. I would have to learn to say, 'Yes, father' to you." Smiling at the idea.

Vedene was unable to see the humour of the situation. He shook his head obstinately.

"It wouldn't work," he objected. "We'd give ourselves away all the time. I ain't old enough. I seem old to you. You think I'm old because you've always thought of me as old. But there ain't that different between us. We couldn't fool anybody. The first one we told it to would know we were lying. They would be sure that something was wrong then. It don't matter about me," he continued, as he saw the disappointment in the girl's eyes. "They couldn't hurt me any. But for you——" He shook his head again. "We can't do that!" he said with such finality that Margaret knew the idea was out of the question.

She watched him as he paced up and down the floor on the other side of the table, and forgot her own dejection.

"Poor Francet," she said. "I'm an awful worry to you, aren't I."

Vedene shook his head energetically.

"'Tain't that. I like to do things for you, but I can't think how to do 'em. You ain't a bit more scared of going than I am of seeing you go. Yet I'm scared to think of you staying. There's worse things going to happen here yet. She's going to marry Joe. God knows what'll happen then!"

"I won't stay! I won't go back! It's horrible enough now; I can't think what it would be like with Joe. The house would be full of those men all the time. They would be drinking and gambling. Goodness knows what it would be like!"

"It's a pity you ain't getting married," Francet soliloquized. "That would be the best way out. Ain't there none of the young bucks in town you like?"

"You want to get rid of me, don't you, Francet?"

"Me get rid of you! No, I don't want to get rid of you. But it would be the best way."

"You'd better go into town and rope one for me," she suggested ironically. "Don't tell him what he has to do nor what you want him for. Blindfold and tie him so that he can't escape. Then bring him out, and load your shotgun and say: 'Now then! Take your choice. Marry this Margaret or I'll blow your brains out! She's got to have a husband of some kind!'"

Vedene laughed, but protested nevertheless.

"It's all right to make fun of it, but that would be the best way out of the fix we're in."

Margaret shook her head decisively.

"No, that won't do. There's nobody I want to marry. I wouldn't marry any of them. Why, Francet," she cried jokingly, "you'll have to marry me yourself."

The instant the words left her lips the laughter faded from her eyes and she looked at poor Francet with a different expression. He had taken no notice of her words, was hardly, in fact, conscious of hearing them. Facetiousness made no appeal to him just then.

The girl watched him with big, round eyes. She did not see his caricature of a body; thought only of his kindly spirit. If she were married to him they could go away together, and no one could say a word. She would have a ring on her finger, and they could live just as they had always lived. Being married need make no difference. It would only make things easy—easy for her and easy for Francet. Poor Francet! And he would be happy, and it would be nice to make him happy.

"Francet," she whispered, awestruck at the idea.

He happened to be at the other end of the room. He could see her face dimly only, as if he were looking at it through a screen.

"Eh?"

"Did you hear what I said?"

"What you said? I don't know. What was it you said? Something about why didn't I marry you myself?"

"Yes. That was it."

"I wasn't paying any attention," he explained, almost irritably. "I'm thinking! It's no joke, Margy. We've got to do something." Her face cleared of the fog that had enshrouded it as he drew near, and the seriousness of her expression puzzled him.

"I wasn't joking. Why don't you marry me yourself?"

Francet did not answer, but went closer to her so that he might see her face clearly. His mild brown eyes beneath the shaggy lock of grey hair which hung partly over the white scar across his forehead were alight with intense but unbelievable inquiry.

"Eh?" he said again, unable to believe that he had heard aright. There was no mistaking the gravity of her eyes.

"You're not scared, are you, Francet?"

"Scared! No, I'm not scared. Scared of what?"

"Of what I said."

He stared at her without replying for a few moments. All his life people had made fun of him. It seemed to him that the giving of life itself to such a man as he, so maimed, so different, so puny, so insignificant when compared with a normal man, had been a joke too, a joke that the gods had played upon him in a spirit of ironic mischief. And that his desires were as the desires of other men, seemed the greatest joke of all.

"You're crazy!" he ejaculated at last. "You don't know what you're saying."

Her proposal seemed a mockery, a taunt. She would not have dared to make it to any ordinary man. As one thought followed another through his brain, the expression of his eyes had swiftly changed, and Margaret grasped something of what was taking place in his mind.

"Don't look like that, Francet. You look as if I'd stabbed you! I meant it! Just think! It does away with all our troubles. I needn't go away alone. We can go wherever we want, and I'll always be quite safe, and you don't know how nice it will feel to be quite safe again, as I used to feel when father was alive."

But Francet would have none of it.

"No!" he cried vehemently. "You're crazy! You shouldn't have thought of it! You're making fun of me too. You needn't have done that."

"But I'm not making fun, Francet. I wouldn't make fun of you. I've never made fun of you. You know I've not. Not once in all my life."

"But it is a joke!" he declared. "You're mad, crazy, just now, or you wouldn't have thought of it."

"But I'm not mad, and I do mean it. There is nothing else we can do. Can't you see I mean it? It's the only way we can go together—it's the only way we can get away. You've always said that you'd do anything for me. Father said you would too. Just before he died, we were talking one day and he said: 'Francet will look after you. You can depend on Francet, anyway,' and now this is the only way you can look after me—the only way you can do anything—the only way that you can help me at all, and you won't do it!"

"Not that way," protested poor Francet. "Not that way. It ain't right!" He faced her. "Look at me!" he cried. "Fancy yourself married to a thing like me! I ain't a man! God knows what I am! Everybody would pity you. You don't know what love is now. Some day you will—then what will you think of me? How will you look at me then? And that day will come. You shake your head and smile. You don't believe it. That's because you don't know what love is, and you think it don't exist; but it does. I'd be in your way, and you wouldn't be able to love. But you would, in spite of yourself, and then they'd say you was a bad woman, and you'd be cursed for ever! And how do you think I would

feel? Do you think I wouldn't know? I'd see it in your eyes. You wouldn't be able to hide it. You'd try. I know you'd try; but it would be there and I would see it. You'd curse me! You wouldn't know you were doing it, but you would! Every minute I was near you, you'd curse me. Just think of it! That to go on—always!"

"Stop!" she cried. "Stop!" She sprang up and placed the palm of her hand across his lips as if to dam the words that were overwhelming her. "No!" she exclaimed. "We won't do it. We won't do it! It's not true what you said, not true, it would never happen, but we won't do it. Don't talk about it any more, Francet!" She almost fell into her chair, and throwing her arms across the table, burst into a fit of wild weeping. "I wish I were dead!" she cried, and at the moment she believed what she said. Death at that instant was preferable to life's perplexities which seemed unconquerable.

Francet turned his back upon her unable to endure the spectacle of her misery. He could not trust himself to watch her.

To Margaret, as to youth at any time, the present only was real.

"You've thought of what will never happen," she said, when her sobs had lessened somewhat, "but have you thought of what is happening—what brought me here? Have you thought of what may happen to-morrow or the day after, or at any time? Have you thought of my being in that dreadful house, with men drunk there almost every night? Have you thought of all those things? Have you thought of what is bound to happen if I stay there? No! You haven't thought of any of those things, have you? You've thought only of what may happen. Of things that may never be; will not be!"

Vedene paced the floor, but made no answer. Only his tense expression told her how he was torn.

"It's the only way there is," she said. "There is no other."

"The only way . . . the only way!" The words went through poor Francet's brain over and over again. The temptation of it!

"It isn't as though it would make any difference to us," she pleaded. "We can go on living just as we have always lived. The only difference would be that we could go anywhere together."

"That is not marriage," the imp in Vedene's brain tempted. "It's just lending her your name. And then you will be able to look after her, be able to work for her, be able to take her away from all this. Surely you love her enough to do as little as that!"

"But the other man, when he comes!" Francet demanded the tempter. "What about the other man?"

"Well, what about the other man! If you don't marry her now, you lose her at once. You expose her to dangers you dare not think of. Marry her and you keep her safe, and she is yours, perhaps for ever. What more do you want? Isn't that enough?"

"But the other man!" mentally protested Francet.

"The other man," sneered the imp, and it seemed to be laughing at him. "There's a way even there—for you—if you love her!"

"A way! Yes, there was a way. After all, there was a way! What a fool he had been not to think of it!" It seemed to him that the imp who had been whispering began to laugh. But that did not deter Francet. He was not afraid of the price he was certain of paying some day. Margaret was worth it, and the price was to him, but low. His little, misshapen figure appeared to straighten in a glow of exultation. His bargain was good. He felt more whole and confident than ever before.

"Don't cry any more, Margy," he said. "It's all right. I'll do it."

"I knew you would, Francet. I knew you would! You've never yet refused me anything. And then we can go away from here. Get right away!"

"I'll go into town to-morrow and see if I can find Harry and get that money from him," said Francet.

"But he may not be able to pay yet." The prospect of delay alarmed her again.

"Then I'll have to borrow some from somebody. I'll have to get a license and a ring, and I'll have to buy some grub too, so that we'll be all ready to go as soon as the thaw comes."

"But that isn't all," she said. "You'll have to go to Mr. Maculay and ask him to marry us—when shall we ask him to marry us?"

"When can you be ready?"

"Any time."

"We've got to stay here till the snow goes. Say in two or three weeks?"

"Two or three weeks! Surely not all that time! Tell him we want to be married—to-day week."

"All right."

Francet went to the door and opened it. There were signs of the coming day.

Closing the door again, he rummaged in a box in a corner of the shack, and produced an old revolver and two or three cartridges.

"You won't have to use this," he said. "You needn't be scared. Steve'll quit when he sees it, but it ain't likely he'll try the door again. And buck up, Margy; it won't be for long now." He took down his coat.

Everything was as Margaret had left it when she returned to her room.

Vedene did not go back to his shack, but started to haul hay. At breakfast he told Mrs. Goulet that he was going to town.

"What for?" she demanded. Then without further consideration of the matter, snapped. "You can't go."

"The stock is all fed. They'll want perhaps a couple of loads after dinner. Steve can do that. I'm going."

His manner puzzled Mrs. Goulet.

"You've done all that!" she exclaimed, and something in his attitude made her alter her decision.

"All right, you can go then," she said, but wondered at the change in him, and why he wished to go to town. She had an uneasy feeling that it portended trouble.

CHAPTER XIX

MARGARET waited impatiently for the seven days to pass. She was harassed by doubts as to how Mrs. Goulet would accept the news of the intended visit to town. Time after time she brought herself almost to the point of asking permission, but each time at the last moment her courage failed.

Vedene relieved her of the task.

"Eh?" Mrs. Goulet ejaculated, suspicious at once.

"Me and Margaret are going to town to-morrow," he repeated stoutly.

She looked at him through narrowed lids, her eyes evil and menacing.

"What for?"

She asked the question in a low tone, fighting her apprehensions and wondering if Vedene had found out that the farm was not wholly hers.

"We're just going. Margy ought to have a trip. She ain't been to town for a long time."

For a moment Mrs. Goulet considered. She could see that her sanction was asked only as a matter of form, that Vedene had made up his mind to go. To gain time she asked:

"How about the feeding?"

"Steve can do that for once."

The mention of Stephen's name was an inspiration to Mrs. Goulet. She would send him to town at once with a message for Joe, directing him to watch Margaret and Francet when they arrived. In her relief she smiled at Vedene, confident that she had outwitted him.

"All right," she agreed. "I guess it won't hurt her any to have a trip."

Vedene was surprised to see Macdonald start for town shortly afterward but thought no more about it. Stephen made a quick trip and returned quite sober.

Margaret and Vedene started early the following day. Margaret could hardly believe it true that they had got away with so little trouble. Until they had left the lake behind, she kept turning in her seat, or looking over her shoulder. She had seen Mrs. Goulet's face close to the kitchen window, and the malevolent smile upon it haunted her. She expected a signal to return, or to see Macdonald galloping after them, but at last a roll in the land hid both lake and house from view.

"We are away," she exclaimed, drawing a deep breath in sheer gratitude for the relief.

Vedene had not been bothered by fears of Mrs. Goulet.

"Of course we are," he said.

"I shall be glad when it's all over."

Vedene tried to cheer her. "Don't worry. She can't do nothing to us. I ain't worried about her. I'm thinking all the time about that money for the horses. We won't be able to go till Harry pays up. And the thaw is coming soon. I've got six dollars and eighty cents left out of what I borrowed the other day and what I had myself. Five of that I've got to give the parson unless I stall him off."

"You can't do that!" Margaret cried, shocked at the idea of a marriage performed on credit.

"We've got to have a meal, and pay for the team to have a feed. We're going to be busted before we're through!"

"I've got sixty cents."

She gravely offered it to Vedene, who refused it.

"No. You keep it. You may want it for something."

"We'll have enough," said Margaret, with an air of triumph. "There will be five dollars for getting married. Twenty-five cents each for a meal at the hotel. That's five-fifty, and twenty-five cents for the team at the barn. That's five—seventy-five all together. We'll have enough."

"Sure," confirmed Francet, much relieved. "We've got lots. I hadn't figured it all up. We won't have to borrow any. But we'll have to get that money from Harry before we can get out of the country. We've got to have a stake. But I'm glad I got all we'll need in the way of grub the last time I was in town. I don't feel like going into the stores to-day."

It did not occur to Margaret to ask where they were going when they went away. That they were going was sufficient. Where, was of no great import.

"You've got everything? You're sure?"

"Everything. Enough to last a month or more. And we'll run across stores long before that."

The sun was high in the sky. There was not a cloud from horizon to horizon, nothing but a tremendous sweep of blue arching overhead. The reflecting light from the snow was dazzling. There was not a break in the almost flawless expanse, not a house, and for miles not even a naked poplar to relieve the eye. The trail climbed the long, low ridges that ran across the prairie, or descended into hollows between them. The vista was so vast that progress appeared to be very slow.

Like all girls, Margaret had dreamed of marriage. She had often wondered how the bridegroom of her desires would come to her, and what he would be like. Yet although she was on her way to be married, none of the exaltation, none of the sensuous bliss of her dreams came to her now. She had no thought of love, and there was not a tinge of romance in the thought that her husband to be was at her side.

Until now Vedene's life had been an aimless drifting, an existence devoid of motive. In the high purpose that had come to him, he felt himself dignified. He who had been the butt of ridicule, felt himself elevated above those who had tormented and treated him with contempt. It was a great day for Francet Vedene.

They arrived in town a little before noon, left the horses in the livery-barn and went to the hotel for a meal.

The bell was ringing as they entered. Joe was at the desk, prepared to carry out Mrs. Goulet's request and to function as a detective.

"Hallo!" said he. "Steve told me yesterday you was coming in. You're getting gay, ain't you, coming into town all the time?" His blue eyes swept over them searchingly, and he wondered at Vedene's abstracted air. Margaret's fears returned. Joe was coupled with so much that was sinister in her mind that she could not free herself of the feeling that in some way he boded them no good.

"I needed a change," she replied. "It gets monotonous to stay on the ranch always."

Joe agreed: "Sure! That's what I'm telling Susan all the time." Margaret noticed that her step-mother was Susan to him now. Joe continued: "I tell her she ought to come into town more often. Livens you up all right, though it ain't what you'd call gay and festive in here." Joe's breezy laughter boomed out. "Not by a damned sight!" he added, following that exclamation with an apology: "Sorry. Mustn't forget myself. How's mother?"

"Just as usual."

"But she needs a change," said Joe, shaking his head. "She's been too long out there. What she needs is to see some life. Yes, by George, that's what she needs. Life!"

"She ought to come and stay in here," suggested Vedene. "She could look through the window of the bar when there's a fight on."

Joe's laughter boomed out louder than before. "Why, Francet, I didn't think you had it in you! No, sir! That's a good one! I can just see her doing it!" When he had recovered he asked: "When are you going back?"

"We've got to get back to-night," said Vedene. "We've got to get back sure."

"What's the rush? I guess Margy wants to see some of the girls again."

But Margaret declined. "We'll have to get back," she declared.

"Well, you're going to eat anyway," said Joe. "I'll be off about two. If you'll stay around till then, I'll see that you don't get lonely. I suppose you're going to do some shopping, eh?"

"We ain't figgering——" began Vedene, but caught himself in time. "Is Harry around?" he asked. "I want to know when he's coming through with that money for those horses of mine."

"He's out buying some stock somewhere. I'll tell him you was asking," said Joe. "He'll hurry up then."

Margaret detected the sneer in his voice but was so accustomed to hearing Vedene belittled that she took small notice of it.

"I have some shopping to do and there isn't much time to spare," said Margaret. "No time to feel lonely."

"No," Joe agreed. "There never is enough time for a woman to go shopping! Why, when Francet was in last time he only took an hour or so to load up with all kinds of truck. Going to start a store out there, Francet?"

"Store, nothing!" replied Vedene, sharply. The energy of his denial made Joe suspicious. He looked after them as they entered the dining-room and mentally commented: "I wonder what they're up to? There's something doing!"

Francet took off his coat and hung it in the lobby. He was dressed in all his best, which gave Joe more food for thought. Francet was wearing a cheap serge suit, much crumpled and creased from years of lying in a box. Minus his coat and his usual loose overalls he looked smaller than ever, and the hump upon his back much larger. The sleeves of his coat had been short when he purchased the suit, and the creases and folds made them shorter still, and his abnormally long arms stretching beyond their coverings appeared longer than ever.

Conscious of his finery, Vedene was more than ever awkward. He desired to do justice to the occasion and assumed a dignity that succeeded only in giving him an

appearance of strutting. Beside Margaret's tall and graceful figure, he looked altogether comical, though Margaret was blissfully unconscious of it: too accustomed to Francet to see anything unusual in him. Joe, leaning over his desk and craning his neck to follow their progress, could hardly refrain from guffawing aloud.

"He sure does look funny!" he merrily soliloquized.

Margaret was very serious when they had taken their seats.

"You shouldn't have told Joe we were not going to do any shopping."

"But I didn't tell him."

"He knew what you were going to say. I could see that he knew. He's suspicious. I could tell it by the way he looked."

"Let him be suspicious! He can't do anything. No one can do anything! What are you scared of? I don't care if everyone knows!"

But Margaret's fears of her step-mother were too deep-seated to be uprooted so easily.

"We mustn't let anyone know. If *she* gets to know, she'll do something! You don't know her. I'll only feel safe when we are away where she can't get at us."

When they left the dining-room Joe was still at the desk.

"Guess you feel better now?" he greeted them. "What are you going to do? I can't get off yet."

Margaret hoped that he would continue to be detained.

"I guess we'll have a walk round," replied Vedene, with so elaborate an air of unconcern that it advertised its falsity.

Joe said: "Sure, sure. Come back in about an hour and I'll be through."

It amused him to keep on insisting that they desired his company. He could see how pleased they were that he was not free, and to assume that they regretted it, tickled his sense of humour. "Don't go without seeing me again."

No sooner was the door closed upon them, however, than Joe donned his coat. He opened the door into the bar-room and called to the man behind the counter:

"Say, Bill. I'm going out. Fred'll be in in a few minutes. Watch here till he comes, will you?"

Bill was quite willing to do so agreeable a fellow as Joe a service, and readily fell in with his wishes. Not two minutes had elapsed since Margaret and Vedene had left, before Joe was peering carefully out of the door after them.

The town was not extensive, and there was no danger of Margaret and Vedene getting lost in its ramifications. The most remarkable thing about the place was the amount of space it had for growth. There was but one street. The stores had small, board platforms before their welcoming doors, but they were chiefly to hold rings to which customers might secure their teams or mounts. Two of the stores were long tunnel-shaped buildings, but the third, owned by the Hudson Bay Company, was more pretentious, boasting two stories. So magnificent a building, a hundred feet deep and fifty in width, was a constant source of pride and gratification to the whole district. There was a bank, twelve by fourteen feet perhaps, and three livery-barns. In addition there were perhaps two dozen dwellings.

The church, quite isolated, was some two or three hundred yards beyond the most out-lying house. Whoever had conceived the idea of building it there, had thought probably, to remove his spiritual adviser as far from the temptations of the town as was convenient. A little beyond the church, was the building where the parson and his overflowing family resided.

To Margaret the distance to the church seemed tremendous, a way fraught with peril. She had not thought of this. There was no chance of concealment. To reach the church they must go boldly out into the open where all could see.

Under the pretence of examining the display in the store windows, Margaret detained Vedene from making the final dash across the open. The displays consisted chiefly of hay-forks, pails, kitchen stoves, rope and such like goods that were not affected by exposure to the sun. Margaret dawdled so long that Francet knew they must be attracting attention. Although he could not see them, he knew that outside the livery-barns would be the usual loungers. Occasionally a passer-by spoke to them, and always Francet sensed a note of unexpressed surprise in the greeting.

"If we stand looking in the windows much longer everyone'll think we've gone crazy," Vedene expostulated at last.

"But everyone can see us," objected Margaret. "It will be all over the town that we went to church."

"Well, I don't see what standing around here is going to do. They'll be able to see us whenever we make a break for it, unless we leave it till after dark. Then we won't be able to go back to-night."

The argument was convincing to Margaret. Neither she nor Vedene noticed Joe watching from behind a conveniently placed board fence. When he saw the pair advance into the open beyond the last house, he was completely mystified.

He was under a disadvantage now as he could not leave the shelter of the houses without being seen if either Margaret or Vedene should turn. On the other hand, as they were crossing the open prairie, and were standing out like two blots upon the virgin whiteness of the snow, they could not escape his observation.

Joe could scarcely credit his eyes when they turned from the main trail and took the path to the parson's house. He stood with his mouth open. Mr. Maculay came to the door in answer to Vedene's knock, and the three stood conversing for a few minutes; then Margaret and Francet left the door, and Joe thought they were coming back to town. Instead of doing that, however, they turned toward the church, which they entered. Shortly afterward,

Mr. Maculay followed. Then the dumb half-breed, whose duty it was to keep the church clean, appeared. He also entered the building. To further mystify Mrs. Goulet's spy, Mrs. Maculay left her house and hastened after the others.

"What the hell!" Joe gasped.

No sooner had the door closed upon Mrs. Maculay than Joe made haste to cross the open to the church. On reaching it, he tried to look through a window, but it was too high. Cursing softly, but fluently, he went to the door. There he hesitated. If he were to open it and was seen, what excuse could he offer? Margaret and Vedene would know that he had been spying upon their movements. And if he were invited to enter he would be totally lost. Joe could not imagine himself inside a church. He could not remember his last visit to one. To him, they were places to be avoided: the doings inside them were mysterious. Yet he had to see what was happening. He tried the key-hole, but that was blocked. At last, quite desperate, he very gently turned the handle of the door, which fortunately made no noise. Gently he pushed the door till it was slightly open, and saw Margaret sitting in one of the seats talking very earnestly to Mr. Maculay, while, as far from her husband as possible in so small a church, Mrs. Maculay had Vedene engaged. The dumb half-breed sat patiently by himself.

For a few moments Joe stood viewing the scene in amazement. He had heard of persons troubled by an uneasy conscience privately seeking the consolation of religion; of others who had been suddenly converted, and drew his own conclusions. He closed the door as gently as he had opened it, and departed with haste, nor did he halt until he had reached a secluded spot sufficiently distant from the church to be quite safe from observation. There, a little out of breath, more from surprise than from exertion, he took off his cap and wiped his forehead.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he ejaculated at last. "The little cuss!"

It seemed so obvious to Joe. The quiet building, the earnest conversation, the entire absence of congregation.

"Won't Susan laugh at 'em!" thought Joe, laughing himself. "Falling for that stuff! Well, I'm damned! Who would have thought it of the little runt, and to get the girl falling for it too! Say! This beats hell!"

But if Joe could have overheard the conversation between Mr. Maculay and Margaret he would have been still more astounded. When Vedene had called a week before and asked Mr. Maculay to perform the ceremony he had been willing enough. Five dollars, the usual fee for his services on such occasions, was a sum that was very welcome to him. It represented two pairs of boots for the youngsters, or a coat, or some underclothing, or mittens or caps or moccasins for his clamouring brood. All those things were needed, and the need was pressing. The difficulty lay in deciding which of these particular demands should be satisfied. As soon as Mr. Maculay told his wife of the approaching marriage, the number of demands for the five dollars began to grow. The debate had not yet finished and would not finish till the money had been spent.

Not being able to decide which particular need should be satisfied, Mr. Maculay and his wife began to think of the couple who were about to be united. A wedding always made Mrs. Maculay sad. Often she was moved to tears at the happiness in a bride's face, though she kept her weeping to herself, knowing the futility of it, and that not all the tears in the world would prevent women becoming brides. Marriage, to Mrs. Maculay, was synonymous with a ceaseless round of drudgery and a steadily increasing burden of children. She would not have parted with one, but it did seem that blessings were coming to her too freely. She wondered that any woman who was young and free would venture the risk of becoming the recipient of so many manifestations of love.

"Did you say Margaret Goulet and Francet Vedene?" she asked, having paid no attention to the names at first. "Surely not Margaret and Francet Vedene!"

The tone of his wife's voice drew Mr. Maculay from his contemplations. It brought back the disquieting feeling that had come to him when Francet had called a week before. When he answered, he unconsciously adopted the air of a man defending himself. "My dear," he said, "we cannot decide whether it be right for certain people to marry or not. That is not our responsibility."

"But Francet Vedene and Margaret!" cried Mrs. Maculay. "A fine young girl like her marrying a poor little cripple! Why should she?"

"Goodness knows! Why does anyone marry?" retorted Mr. Maculay with a certain amount of acerbity.

"But there can be no love in this! Think of Francet Vedene as a husband!"

Mr. Maculay paced the floor not daring to meet the eyes of his wife. He took his position and his mission seriously. Now that his wife had put into words the uncomfortable thought that had lurked in his own mind, he resolved that he would do what he could to point out to Margaret the importance of the step she was about to take. He thought of the five dollars with sadness and regret. His wife knew what it cost him to say after a few minutes of silence:

"I will speak to her."

Her weary eyes filled with adoration.

"Oh, Will," she cried. "It will come back to us."

But faith in the things that might come back was a little weak in Mr. Maculay. Nothing ever had come back. But he did not allow his lack of faith to interfere with his sense of what was right.

"I hope so, my dear," he said, and allowed the discussion to end at that.

Thus it was that when Joe stealthily opened the door of the church and looked in, he saw Mr. Maculay engaged in earnest conversation with Margaret in one part of the church, and Francet and Mrs. Maculay sitting together as far from the other two as possible.

To Margaret and Francet the church was somewhat awe-inspiring. It was not often they had an opportunity

of attending church, and the lack of a congregation made it doubly strange to them. The light was subdued, a cold, grey light reflected from the snow outside, except for one beam of sunlight that poured through a window in a golden glow. For the first time Margaret realized something of the solemnity of the thing she was about to do. It was suddenly a very great event to her, and she felt sorry for Francet because she had forced him into it.

She was a little alarmed when Mr. Maculay asked for permission to speak with her, and led the way to the most distant seat.

"I hardly know how to begin what I feel I should say," he commenced a little nervously. "It is a difficult matter to discuss. I would like, though, to make you feel that I am thinking only of you, and what is best for you, and not that I wish to inquire into things which you may possibly feel concern you alone. I would like you to be sure of that."

Stirred by the nervousness and the solemnity of his tone, Margaret turned her wide, brown eyes upon him.

"I'm sure of that," she replied.

"I thank you," Mr. Maculay said gravely. He continued, some of the nervousness leaving his voice: "It would be so easy to suspect me of meddling, and so difficult to prove that that is what I have no desire to do. I wish only to ask if you have thought about the meaning of marriage?"

"The meaning of marriage!" exclaimed Margaret, in a low voice. "I know what getting married means," she added.

"Do you? Are you sure? Marriage is a terribly serious thing!"

"I know," agreed Margaret, solemnly.

Mr. Maculay paused for a moment. "I would not have spoken about it at all," he continued, "but I feel that there must be something extraordinary in such a marriage as this, a marriage which you wish to be kept secret, and at which no friend, not even your mother, is going to be present. May I ask why?"

For a few moments Margaret sat without replying. She disliked the idea of telling all that had happened since the death of her father. But Maculay's kind and sympathetic tone conquered her scruples.

"Mother wouldn't let me marry Francet if she knew."

"Why?"

"She wants me to marry Stephen Macdonald."

"Oh! So she wants you to marry Stephen Macdonald? And don't you like Macdonald?"

Margaret shook her head vigorously.

"No."

"If you don't wish to marry Macdonald there is nothing to compel you to."

"I would rather be dead!"

"As bad as that!" Mr. Maculay exclaimed. "Has Macdonald bothered you a great deal?"

But Margaret could not tell him what had occurred.

"It's been very hard since father died," she said at last. Mr. Maculay could see the unhappiness in her eyes and could imagine how bad it had been. He knew of the visits of Joe to the ranch, and of Macdonald's drinking habits and that he was living at Mrs. Goulet's home.

"And so to get away from it all," he said, "you are going to marry Francet?"

"Not for that only! You don't know how good Francet is. I feel safe with him."

"But marriage! One marries for love. Unless one loves there should be no marriage. You must not marry without love. You ought not to marry Francet because you feel safe with him. Marriage is much more than being safe. Have you thought that all your life from now on you must belong to him. Do you love him enough for that?"

"What do you mean by love?" she asked. "There is no one in the world I like better than Francet. I would go anywhere with him and would never be afraid. I am quite willing to live with him always, and I would be very sorry if anything were to happen to him, almost as sorry as I was when father died."

Mr. Maculay shook his head.

"You don't appear to know what love is," he remonstrated, gently. "Love is different from that. I hardly know how to explain, but I am sure you have no love for Francet, such as a woman should have for her husband."

"But I do love him!" she declared, "I do! I love him better than anyone in the world. There's no one I would rather marry than Francet. I know Francet. He is very good. There's not another man I've ever seen that I like better than Francet."

"But liking is not love."

Margaret was chilled with a sudden fear that Maculay was going to refuse to marry them.

"Aren't you going to marry us?" she asked. "You'll be very wicked if you don't!"

Maculay stared at her in amazement.

"How? Why?"

"Because I shall go with him. You'll think that is bad!"

"That would be a sin!"

"Sin!" Her eyes flashed at him. He saw that she was not afraid of the word. "I don't know whether it is a sin or not. I don't care!"

"You must not speak like that!" Mr. Maculay reproved gently. But it was evident to him that Margaret had fully resolved upon her course of action. Well, he had done all he could. If he did not marry them goodness knows what greater evil would follow. No one could reasonably expect him to do more than he had. And, perhaps, he consoled himself, it were better Margaret should marry Francet than go on living with her step-mother under the conditions that had developed. However, it was useless for him to attempt to cure fools of their folly, or to set the world right. One had to do the best one could; compromise, choosing the lesser evil. And also—there were the five dollars which he needed very badly.

"I spoke only for your good," he reminded her. "I had only your welfare in mind. However, I'll perform the ceremony. Come."

CHAPTER XX

THE thaw had come and the cattle were out on the range. Harry, the cattle dealer, had received permission from Mrs. Goulet to pay Vedene for the horses, and Vedene and Margaret planned to be off within three days. The fear that her step-mother would get to know of her marriage had worried Margaret considerably. She was afraid each time Macdonald returned from town, and still more afraid, when Joe or any of his friends called. She dreaded what Mrs. Goulet might do. When she thought about the matter calmly, she knew that Susan was powerless to undo what had been done, yet the old fear would return to her even though she repeated over and over again to herself: "I'm married! I'm married! I'm a married woman!" But the word contained no magic to oust her obsession.

The day had been hot. The weather had passed from winter to summer seemingly in a day. Only a week before the thermometer had registered below zero; to-day it was far above freezing. Even though it was evening, it was still warm, and the air was filled with a delicious softness, and the odour of wet soil permeated the house.

Mrs. Goulet was sewing. Macdonald was absent. He had been in town two days. The hands of the clock indicated nine.

Mrs. Goulet was thinking of her brother. She knew that the life he was leading could end in one way only, and her affection merged into bitterness. Aloud she said sharply:

"I guess that loafer ain't going to come back to-night."

"It doesn't look like it," agreed Margaret indifferently, looking up from her book.

Mrs. Goulet resented Margaret's answer. It seemed to express condemnation. What right had she to condemn

him! If she had done as she should, then Steve would not be going on as he was; he would be home, and behaving decently. It seemed to Mrs. Goulet that she was a very unfortunate woman. Nothing went right for her. She consoled herself that it was far less through her that Steve had gone wrong than it was through the refusal of Margaret to marry him. Yet she, Mrs. Goulet, had the accusing conscience; she was the one to worry over him; she was the one to suffer, as she had always suffered for the faults of others. What she had done to Steve had been a small matter compared to the injury Margaret had inflicted upon him. Yet Margaret could go on reading and be untroubled by a single prick of conscience, and Mrs. Goulet felt that it was most unfair. She looked at the girl quietly reading and a great desire to interrupt came to her. Why should the girl be so quiet while she felt so miserable?

"Get up and put some wood on the fire," she snapped.

The tone brooked no delay, and Margaret, with a quick and apprehensive glance at her step-mother, hastened to obey. Then she returned and quietly resumed her book. For a time her step-mother worked in silence, occasionally glaring across the table at the girl's bent head as if she would like to hit it.

Mrs. Goulet's cogitations dwelt on her imagined ills. No one treated her right or ever had. Even Francet had changed. These last few weeks he had altered altogether. Perhaps turning religious was responsible for the change in him. People did all kinds of foolish things when they took religion. Perhaps that was why Margaret was so quiet and confident in her manner lately. She looked across at the girl with a new curiosity, examining her closely.

Margaret's head was bent low over the table; the light was very poor and the print she was reading, small, and Mrs. Goulet could see a strip of ribbon just below her hair at the nape of her neck. If Margaret had been sitting upright it would have been hidden. Mrs. Goulet wondered why Margaret was wearing it. Certainly not for an

ornament. Just another piece of foolishness, Mrs. Goulet supposed.

"What have you got that ribbon around your neck for?"

She intended putting a stop to this kind of thing. The girl had been spoilt by her father, but she was not going to be spoilt any longer. She had decorated herself too much; been allowed to dress as she liked. Now she was wearing ribbons!

The question fell like a thunderbolt on Margaret. She looked up, her eyes wide and startled. Instinctively she put her hand to her breast.

"A ribbon!" she gasped. The blood rushed from her face, and left it deathly pale. She dropped her hand, realizing that her action had betrayed her. "A ribbon," she murmured again, less from a wish to deny that she had a ribbon, than to gain time to collect herself.

The girl's obvious alarm and the instinctive movement of her hand, had not been lost on Mrs. Goulet. Something must be fastened to the ribbon. She knew that Roman Catholics sometimes wore a cross in just such a manner, and the thought came to her that perhaps Margaret had turned Roman Catholic. The incongruity of conversion to the Roman Catholic faith in a protestant church did not occur to her.

"What have you got on it?" she asked.

For a moment Margaret did not reply. Her brain refused to function. At last she gasped:

"Nothing."

Mrs. Goulet was unconvinced. She had no doubt that she had guessed correctly, and resolved that she would see what was on the ribbon, and then by taunt and jeer vent her spleen.

"Nothing," she said. "All right then. Take it off. You don't want to wear ribbons."

She fixed her eyes on Margaret's and watched the terror grow in them with malicious glee.

"I won't—I don't want to take it off," Margaret said firmly.

"Oh!"

The ejaculation was full of surprise. The refusal was so unexpected that Mrs. Goulet was nonplussed for the moment. She was more determined than ever to see what was on the ribbon; her curiosity was aroused. But she did not wish to spoil the sport she anticipated by demanding to see at once, however; preferred to torment a little longer. When the amusement began to pall she would see that she was obeyed.

"So you want it," she sneered. "One would imagine that you were a little girl again, wearing a ribbon around your neck."

Margaret did not reply. Her eyes fell to her book and she pretended to read; but Mrs. Goulet could see that she was not reading.

"So you won't let me see what you have on the ribbon?" she asked in a wheedling tone. "I would like to see. You must think a lot of it."

Margaret looked up. "It's nothing!" she declared.

"All right. Why not take it off then?"

"I won't take it off!" the girl cried desperately. "It's mine. I'm going to keep it!"

This defiance was a great deal more than Mrs. Goulet had bargained for. She knew that if she allowed it to pass her hold upon the girl was broken for all time. For the moment, however, she was staggered; needed time to rally her thoughts.

Margaret dropped her eyes to her book again. Her impulse was to run from the room, but she knew that if she did, Mrs. Goulet would be more infuriated than ever. Breathlessly, she awaited the storm that she knew was coming.

With a motion, cat-like in its swiftness, Mrs. Goulet reached across the table, snatched at the neck of the girl's blouse, tore it open, and the ring swung out. Mrs. Goulet was so amazed when she saw it, that she forgot to loosen her hold on the blouse. Margaret jerked herself backward and the blouse flew open from top to bottom.

Mrs. Goulet was bereft of speech. She could only point at the ring lying upon Margaret's white breast. For a few moments they continued thus; Susan pointing, Margaret retreating steadily until she reached the wall. If the girl could have wrenched her eyes away she would have fled; but the older woman's eyes held her, and the pointing finger seemed to mesmerize her. At last Mrs. Goulet spoke:

"What is that?"

Now that the ordeal Margaret had feared so greatly had to be faced, fear left her. In a quiet and firm voice she replied:

"My wedding ring."

Mrs. Goulet drew a long, quivering breath. Her brilliant eyes burned in her ashen face.

"Your wedding ring!" she said in so low a tone that it was almost a moan. "Your wedding ring! My God!" With the exclamation, her outstretched hand fell to the table with a thud that rattled the glass on the lamp. Margaret thought that her step-mother was going to faint, but the girl could only stare at her, fascinated. Presently Mrs. Goulet straightened herself in her chair. She looked at Margaret with cold, unblinking eyes.

"Who's the man?" she asked at last, her voice quite controlled now. "Who's your husband?"

"Francet."

Mrs. Goulet's jaw dropped. She sat and gasped. Of all men, Francet was the last she would have imagined Margaret choosing. "Not Francet Vedene?" she exclaimed. "Not Francet!"

Margaret's reply dispelled her doubts.

"It's Francet Vedene! Francet!" she cried, repeating the name as if in defiance.

"Francet!" The name rolled from Mrs. Goulet's lips. Then her eyes lighted with a malicious merriment. "Francet!" she cried again. "My God, Francet!" Her laughter rang out wild and hysterical. She threw her arms across the table, laughing horribly. "Francet! Francet! Francet!" she repeated over and over again. "What a

husband! My God! What a husband!" Then she looked up, her eyes brimming with the tears her hysteria had brought to them. "Good enough for you!" she cried, derisively. "Good enough for you! I hope you're proud of him!" Her laughter was uncontrolled. She laughed till she ached, and could sit in her chair no longer. "Be kind to him!" she begged. "Look after him! He's a tender plant! What a husband!"

She walked up and down the room, her peals of laughter flooding the house. Then a new thought came to her as the girl stood quivering against the wall, her golden wedding ring still clutched in the hand that lay upon her bared breast.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "You ought to be with your husband. Don't you know that a wife's place is with her husband? Surely you ought to know that much! You'll have to go to him," she continued. "Sure!" You'll have to go to him! You mustn't stay here any longer. You've been here too long already. You'd better go to him or he might die on you!" Her mocking laughter broke out anew.

"Francet! Fancy it being Francet Vedene!" she cried. "You better go to him quick! Ain't you scared for him? Why don't you go?" A new inspiration came to her. "How are you going to keep him, now you've got him?" she inquired. "You've got to keep a husband like him you know, such a nice, pretty, delicate little husband like him. You've got to keep——"

In a flash she thought of the answer to her own question. They would build the house across the creek—they would divide the ranch! She suddenly felt cold. Dazed and staggering, she fell into a chair.

It seemed to her that a long time elapsed before her brain cleared. She felt sick and weak, and desperately sorry for herself. There was not a soul she could depend on. Not even Joe. He had seen them in the church and had not guessed what had happened. The poor fool! And he thought himself so clever! And now what was going

to happen. Her brain was cool and she reasoned rapidly and clearly. A way came to her. She did not have to plan, that was already full ripe, waiting for her. It did not occur to her that if she disposed of Margaret, that Francet would inherit the girl's property. She did not think of that. At the moment the one vital need was to get rid of the girl, and she could think of nothing else. For some strange reason while she thought, and the details of her scheme arranged themselves in her mind, she kept her eyes fixed upon Margaret's shrinking form. The girl feared to pass her step-mother to reach her room. Dimly Mrs. Goulet wondered why Margaret shrank away. There was nothing for her to be afraid of now. It was not yet. To-morrow!

The appalling quietness that had descended upon Mrs. Goulet was more terrifying than her laughter. In the eyes that were fixed upon her, in the rigid muscles of the mask-like countenance that confronted her, Margaret read doom. She knew that she was looking at a homicidal maniac. The cold malevolence of Mrs. Goulet's expression was unmistakable. Margaret began to creep forward. She reached her door at last. Mrs. Goulet began to sway back and forth in her chair, and made no attempt to prevent her going.

CHAPTER XXI

MARGARET sat on the edge of the bed in the dark trying to make herself think what she had better do, but the memory of her step-mother's baleful eyes rendered coherent thought impossible. Once she started to her feet in alarm. Mrs. Goulet moved across the floor and Margaret thought that she was coming to her door. A moment afterward the clink of china and glass informed the girl that Susan had gone to the cupboard. Then she heard her step-mother making up the fire. For a long time afterward there was silence. Then Margaret heard the sound of wheels approaching and knew that Macdonald had come home at last. Presently he entered the house and by his step Margaret could tell that he was sober. For some time Mrs. Goulet upbraided him, but Stephen laughed at her. Margaret heard her tell him of the marriage, withholding the name of the bridegroom.

"Who is it?" asked Stephen.

"Guess!" she cried. "All the guesses you want!"

Stephen went over all the probable names, but Mrs. Goulet laughed at him.

"Guess again!" she cried. "Such a husband!"

They made no attempt to subdue their voices, and Margaret could hear all that passed as plainly as if they were in the room.

"Aw, hell!" exclaimed Stephen at last. "There ain't no one. I don't believe she's married at all. If it ain't any of them, then who is it?"

"There's one you've forgotten!"

There was a pause. "You've got me beat," Steve said at last.

"Francet!"

There was a scrape of a chair as Macdonald rose to his feet, and utter incredulity and amazement was in his voice, when, after what seemed a long pause, he cried:

"Francet!"

"That's who," said Mrs. Goulet.

"No!" came Macdonald's deep voice. "No! You're crazy!"

Mrs. Goulet laughed mockingly.

"I don't believe it! That runt! She'd never marry him!"

"Well, she has."

"Aw, hell!" cried Macdonald. "She's fooling you! Margy!" he called. "Are you awake? You ain't married Francet, have you? You're bluffing, ain't you?"

For a moment Margaret did not reply.

"It's true," she answered at last.

"God!" ejaculated Macdonald. Margaret heard him sit down and afterward her step-mother's voice taunting him.

They talked together for hours it seemed to Margaret, but at last they went to bed.

Still Margaret sat upon her bed. She was half-numbed with the chill of the night yet her brain was in a ferment. She thought of the three days that must pass before Vedene would be ready to go. Three days! It seemed to be an eternity away. And to think of the coming morning was a horror. To be jeered at and taunted for three whole days! And that might not be all—would not be all! Her step-mother's eyes still seemed to be looking at her. She remembered them with a shudder. Three days! She felt she would not live three days!

In a sudden panic she sprang to her feet, no longer able to endure the thought of staying in the house another night. The darkness oppressed her. She had the feeling that her step-mother was in the room; knew that this was impossible; that the door had not been opened since she entered; yet could not divest herself of the fear. She groped among the articles on the bureau and found some matches, lit

a candle and controlled herself sufficiently to gather the few belongings she intended to take with her. These she packed in a grain sack she had secreted beneath her mattress; opened the window silently, and dropped the sack outside, then took her fur coat from its peg and dropped that out also. After blowing out the candle she clambered through the window. Without troubling to close the window behind her, she hastily pulled on her fur coat, picked up the sack and darted into the darkness.

The sky was overcast; neither the light of moon nor stars penetrated the murky blackness. The snow had nearly all gone, and only fast vanishing remnants of the deeper drifts remained. It was not freezing, and the trickle of water was the only sound that came to her. Panic held her in its grip. She felt terribly alone, and the way to Vedene's shack was filled with vague dangers. More by instinct than by knowledge she at last reached the tiny building and rattled the handle of the door vigorously. It was not locked, but she did not enter.

"Francet!" she called, glancing back over her shoulder as if she expected to see her step-mother behind her. "Francet! Francet!"

"Just a minute! Just a minute!" Francet answered, in the mumbling tones of the newly awakened. Then a second or two later. "What's happened, Margy."

But she could not tell him while she remained outside. She could only cry: "I want to come in!"

"Just a minute!" he said again.

"Hurry!" she cried, her voice shrill with fear. "Hurry!"

It did not take him long to dress. Then he put a match to the lamp and darkened the window, as he had before.

Margaret dropped her sack as she entered and sank into a chair.

"What have they done to you now?" cried Francet, in alarm at her evident distress. He took one of her hands. "What have they done, Margy?"

"We have got to go," she cried. "At once! She has found out!"

"That!" he exclaimed. "We needn't go just for that! She can do nothing!"

"She can!" The alarm in her voice almost convinced him before he had time to reason. "She can!" Margaret continued. "We've got to go before morning. I saw it come into her eyes. They changed as she looked at me. They were cold and still and dreadful and it was like looking into the face of death!" She covered her face with her hands. "We've got to go!" she cried. "Now! At once!"

Francet could see that it was useless to reason with her, that she could not reason. In spite of himself he was influenced by her terror.

"Did she say anything? What she was going to do?"

"Not a word. But I know she would do something fearful. I could see it in her eyes."

Francet sat on the edge of the bed and gazed around his little dwelling in silence for a few minutes. He produced a plug of tobacco and a knife and slowly sliced a little of the tobacco into the palm of his hand where he rubbed it meditatively, then searched his pockets for papers, and slowly and carefully made a cigarette.

Margaret watched the quiet operation with serious and intent eyes, knowing that Francet was coming to a decision. He lit his cigarette at the top of the lamp-glass, then resumed his seat on the bed. After two or three puffs his eyes wandered back to Margaret.

"All right," he said. "I ain't ready, and I guess the trails will be pretty bad, but we'll take a chance. We'll go anyway."

He began to pack provisions into the box that had served him for cupboard—a bag of flour, a smaller one of sugar, a can of tea, condensed milk, beans, and salt pieces of bacon. His movements appeared to Margaret to be outrageously slow. She was in a fever of impatience to be off. Every moment she expected to hear the sound of a horse galloping up the trail bringing Macdonald.

"Hurry, Francet!" she cried, knowing that she was unjust, and that Francet, infected by her mood, was

making all the haste he could. She helped by handing him articles as he asked for them. He pushed the democrat to the door so that they would have the benefit of the light from the shack while loading.

"They might see the light," protested Margaret.

"We've got to take a chance if we want to get away," said Vedene.

The democrat appeared to be a weak spidery vehicle to undertake a long journey; but Margaret and Francet knew that weak as it looked, broken in places as it was already, with the help of wire to repair fresh breakages, it would go anywhere. It was light, too, so that Vedene's two cayuses could draw it easily, and its lightness made it possible to travel through places where a heavier and more substantial vehicle would have been hopelessly mired.

At last they had the democrat loaded. "We've got everything, I believe," said Francet, looking around the dishevelled little cabin.

"There's nothing more we want here!" cried Margaret. "You can see there's nothing here. Get the horses, Francet, please!" She could see signs of a new day coming. "Hurry, Francet!" she begged.

"It's no good hurrying too much," Francet protested. "We don't want to go and then find that we've left something. We'll be up against it then!"

"Well, there's nothing here."

Francet went to the stable. Margaret could not endure being left, and followed him.

"There's that little barrel," said Francet, as the light from the lantern fell upon it. "We might take that. It will come in handy to carry water with us, in case we get to a place where there isn't any."

He hitched the horses to the democrat, then went into the shack to put out the lamp. Before doing so he stood for a moment looking around. Poor as it was, the building had been a home to him; the only home he had ever known. He was quite convinced that he was never going to see it again. The bare mud-chinked walls seemed to be mutely

reproaching him. It was like leaving an old comrade to his fate. "Good-bye, old joint!" was his brief farewell, half-laughingly spoken; but his accent touched Margaret. Vedene turned the lamp low, then blew it out; slammed the door loudly, clambered into the seat beside Margaret, and took the lines. In another moment they were moving.

The cayuses found the trail almost at once. Here and there the remaining snow-drifts showed a dim, ghostly white.

Margaret was thinking of what Vedene had said before he turned out the lamp.

"You're sorry to leave, aren't you? I won't be able to make it up to you, Francet."

"Look here! Don't you get talking like that!" cried Vedene. "You're wrong. I've got to pay you. I'm sick of the joint. Glad to get away. It's time I was going anyway. It don't do anyone any good to stick in one place all the time. No, we're going to see something different now."

But though he spoke so bravely Margaret knew that he did it only to keep up her courage.

"You're a very good man, Francet," she said.

"You cut that out!" he exclaimed. "Don't you get talking that way to me or we're going to start fighting right away, and that would be a nice thing, wouldn't it, just as soon as we're married!"

His indignation was so exaggerated that Margaret laughed and Francet joined in.

"That's better," he said. "We don't want to get too solemn right away. There's time enough for that."

There was only one way to take, that to the bridge across Goulet's creek. This meant that they had to approach within three hundred yards of the house. There was a faint greying in the eastern sky now, just the faintest of greys; yet, so accustomed had their eyes become to the darkness it appeared to be quite light. There was no light in any of the windows of the house, so Margaret knew that her absence had not been discovered. But as they drew

slowly nearer, the girl unconsciously shrank against Vedene's side.

"They will hear the wheels," she breathed, speaking in so low a tone that Francet barely caught the words.

"Not on this soft ground and at the pace we're going," he reassured her, but he spoke in a low tone also, as if he too were nervous.

The sound of the wheels and the thud of hoofs seemed alarmingly loud to Margaret. "Go slower," she begged, and Francet drew the reins tighter, but still the noise seemed thunderous.

Margaret could imagine Mrs. Goulet arousing. She would lie and listen for a moment, doubting her ears. Then she would get up, and awaken Stephen. They would be out and block the bridge in a few minutes.

"Go a little faster, Francet," she cried in a tense voice. "Just a little faster! And if they come out, gallop."

As they drew nearer the bridge the girl's body quivered as if her muscles were gathered for a leap. She could not take her eyes from the house, and sat clutching the edge of the seat. They passed the barn, and still no light appeared in the house. Then they were upon the bridge. For the few seconds that the horses' hoofs pounded the planks, the noise seemed deafening. Then they were across.

For a time, in her suspense, the girl was incapable of deciding whether to ask Francet to urge the horses to a faster gait, or that they be driven more slowly. The noise while they had been crossing the bridge had been so great that it seemed impossible that her step-mother had not awakened. But still no light appeared behind them, and soon they reached the flats, soggy from the melting snow.

"Trot now, Francet," cried Margaret, and when the horses began to mend their pace, she wished them to be urged still faster. They could not go fast enough now to satisfy her. She turned around in her seat as the meadow was crossed. The house fascinated her, and she could not take her eyes from it.

"You've no need to keep looking there. We're safe now!" Francet remonstrated. He had been affected by Margaret's panic, and he spoke partly to reassure himself. "If they had heard us they would have been out long ago." But Margaret paid no attention.

They began to ascend the slope on the farther side of the meadows. As they approached the prairie the lake lay below and behind them like a sheet of molten lead, reflecting the colour of the sky. Far in the east, long streamers of light shot upward from the rising sun which was still below the horizon. Then the trail dipped and the lake was hidden from view.

"I don't know if we'll be able to get across the river," said Francet. "The last I heard the ice had gone from the banks, though it was still solid in the middle."

For a moment Margaret hardly comprehended what he said, her mind was so full of anxiety. Then she realized the meaning of his words.

"We have got to get across!" she said, as if that ended it. "We shall be safe then."

"That's all right, but we don't want to go in the river. That won't do us much good. We don't want to finish in the Saskatchewan."

"We must get across," she insisted. "We must!" She suggested that if they found it impossible to cross in the democrat they abandon it and reach the ice in the centre of the river by means of a raft.

"That's all right, but how are we going to get off the ice on the other side? And then we're stuck and can go no farther. We'll have to feed the horses when we get to the river anyway. We can walk along the bank while they are feeding and see if we can't find a place to get across."

But Margaret would have none of it. "Let us cross first, before the horses are fed," she insisted, expecting every moment to hear the pounding of pursuing hoofs.

It must have been almost eight o'clock when they reached the long slope that descended to the river. On the opposite bank they could see with startling clearness the buildings

of the little town; even the smoke above the chimney tops though the town was still three miles away.

The trail dipped steeply just before the ice was reached and Vedene stopped the horses. They could see that the ice came right to the shore, and that the information Francet had received of open water was incorrect. Vedene's sight was not good enough to see across the river.

"Can you see if the ice goes clear across?"

It was about half a mile to the opposite bank which was shaded with a heavy growth of spruce, willow and poplar, but Margaret could see that the ice did not extend to the farther shore. There was a dark streak along the bank which she knew to be running water.

"It's open over there," Margaret admitted at last.

"Then we can't get across," decided Francet. "It's no good driving out on the river unless we can get off. Better turn up the bank here. No one is going to cross that river till the ferry goes in. Maybe a couple of weeks yet. We'd better keep on going on this side."

"Try," the girl begged. "There will be another spot like this on the other side somewhere. There's sure to be another. If we take a chance and get across, no one would be likely to follow us. Don't you see that?"

But Francet was thinking of the danger. He knew that the ice might break at any moment, and to be caught on it would mean certain death, and shook his head.

"We'd better not."

Margaret watched him with dismay. "You're not afraid, are you, Francet? I'm not! There is sure to be another place where we could land on the other side."

"It's too dangerous!"

"It's not too dangerous! Nothing like the danger of staying here! I'd rather go through the ice than go back!" To compel him to a decision, she called to the horses, though Francet held the lines, and the democrat started down the steep incline and a second later, the wheels rattled harshly on the ice. Then they could see, what before had been hidden from them by the trees. Below and above the

neck of ice they were on open water, and as far as Margaret could see up and down the river this was the only spot where the ice touched the shore. But decision once forced upon him, Francet had no desire to turn back.

They said not a word. The time for talking had passed, and every faculty they possessed was concentrated upon the task of watching each step the horses took, in guiding them so that holes in the ice were avoided. They drove up the centre of the wide river and passed around one of the numerous bends, so that the place where the trail reached the ice was shut off from their view. To them both came a feeling of isolation; they were in a world of their own, and hedged around with dangers. Francet kept talking to the horses who snorted apprehensively as they skirted gaping holes or long cracks through which the turgid water boiled.

"Steady," he said in soothing tones. "Steady! You're all right; there's nothing going to happen."

Margaret sat silently by his side. The sense of danger was so imminent and pressing that she was chilled, but she was quite calm and prepared for anything.

"Look out for a landing place," warned Vedene. "I can't see properly. It's up to you."

"I'm watching," she replied without a tremor.

They seemed to have been on the ice for hours, and hope was beginning to weaken in them that a landing place would present itself, when Margaret said eagerly, breaking the silence: "The ice seems to be jammed over there," She pointed to a spot where the ice had collected and formed a rough bridge to the shore. She knew that such a jam might break at any moment and disappear; that the displacing of a single block might free the whole mass, but she could see also that the ice-jam was their one opportunity of escape. There was open water from shore to shore a half mile farther up the river.

Vedene had to make a little detour as there was a stretch of open water between them and the spot where the gap to the bank was bridged. Viewed closely, the ice-bridge appeared more dangerous than ever. A large rock almost

in the centre of the channel had caught the first block of ice; others had collected until the open water had been dammed. There was a constant hiss and grind as fresh blocks were carried down to crash into the accumulating mass. In the few minutes that Margaret and Vedene watched, they saw that a constant movement was going on, even in the bridge itself. Blocks of ice were forced upward with the immense pressure. Occasionally it appeared as if the whole mass was about to break away.

Both Margaret and Vedene avoided comment. They both knew that desperate as it was, this was their only chance of reaching the shore.

Vedene drove the team to the edge of the ice-bridge, but the horses drew back, afraid to trust themselves upon it. The ice was so uneven, that Vedene doubted whether the wheels of the democrat would pass over, even though the animals could be induced to venture upon it. Several times Vedene tried to drive the horses forward, but each time they refused.

"I'll go ahead," Margaret said. "You drive. Perhaps they'll follow me."

Vedene started to object, but before he could speak, Margaret had slipped to the ice, almost up to her ankles in the brown water that covered it. She went to the horses' heads; talked to them soothingly for a moment or two, then started across.

"Get up!" Francet called again. He drew the lines tight to support the animals as much as possible, and snorting with fear, with eyes wild and starting, with bodies crowding together, they followed the girl. The passage lasted not more than two minutes, but it seemed like hours before with a frantic jump, the horses reached the gravelly shore.

Vedene drove a short distance along the bank, then left the team and returned to Margaret who was sitting upon a fallen tree. She looked up at him and forced herself to a sickly smile.

"Well, we're across," she remarked, inanely.

"Yes, we're across," returned Francet. He sat down beside her and they both stared blankly across the ice without speaking. For a time one would have imagined that they had come to the end of their journey, they sat so listlessly.

Vedene presently fell to studying the ice-bridge.

"It only wants a little to start that a-going," he remarked meditatively. "I thought it would go before this."

"So did I," said Margaret. "I expected it to go every moment. But no one is likely to try to cross it."

"What we did others can do," declared Francet dryly. "I wonder if we could start it moving. I'll get a pole and try to shift some of those blocks by the rock there. Then no one will be able to cross this old river hereabouts for a week anyway. They may cross all they like after that."

He went to the democrat for the axe, then, from the bush he brought a long spruce pole, which he carried across the ice to the rock.

"Can you get back if the ice starts to go?" Margaret asked.

"Don't you worry; I'll get off all right. You watch me!"

For a time his efforts were unavailing, but presently he prised a block from the face of the mass, which quivered and began to move. Francet worked frantically with his pole and blocks began to break away.

"It's going!" shouted Vedene, and in another minute all the ice between the rock and the bank was moving. Then Francet had to clamber nimbly over the shifting ice, leaping over occasional gaps. He landed fifty yards from where the bridge had been but a few moments before.

"Hooray!" he cried. "Now they can come if they want to!"

The last fear had been removed from Margaret's mind by the destruction of the bridge. She clapped her hands in glee.

"Bravo, Francet!" she called. "That was clever of you!"

"Well, I guess we can go and feed now," he remarked, well satisfied. "About time."

After some searching they found a trail through the bush which the horses could follow to the level prairie. They could see across the valley, the trail that went down to the river. There was a solitary horseman outlined against the sky, just as they themselves were outlined.

"It's Macdonald!" cried Margaret. "At least I believe it is. I'm not sure."

"Give him a wave for luck, anyway," said Vedene. "It may be him."

Margaret stood up and waved her hand in derision, but the distance was too great to see if an answering signal was made, and presently the horseman disappeared into the valley.

Francet unhitched the horses, hobbled them, and turned them out to graze, then collected dry wood from the bush and made a fire.

"We'd better take some of this along with us in case we get to a place where there ain't none," he said. "We won't use it unless we have to."

"Build a big fire, Francet," said Margaret. "I've got to take off these stockings and dry them."

CHAPTER XXII

TOWARD evening they emerged from the park-like country through which they had been passing, and before them stretched the naked prairie. There was not even a willow bush on the ocean of grass. Vedene stopped the horses. Both he and Margaret were overwhelmed by the apparently limitless space.

Vedene broke the spell at last.

"What are we stopping here for," he demanded. "Shall we go on? Which way shall we go?"

"I don't know," answered Margaret, shaking off the awe that held her. "It doesn't matter which way. They all look alike. Let's go west. But perhaps we'd better stay here for the night," she added. "There's water—and lots of feed for the horses," she finished, laughingly.

There was feed enough for a million horses. Crocuses were already above the ground and the new grass was beginning to show.

"I guess that's a good idea," said Vedene. "We needn't travel late. There's all kinds of time."

He began to unhitch. Close at hand there was water in a little depression fed from a bank of melting snow. They unloaded the democrat, pitched Margaret's tent, and put the camp stove and the provisions into it. Vedene unrolled the beds he had made of sacking filled with hay, while Margaret prepared the evening meal. The stars were shining before they sat down.

As the evening advanced a sense of peace came to Margaret as she gazed across to where Francet reclined comfortably upon his mattress rolling a cigarette.

"What are we going to do?" she asked. "We'll have to do something for a living." Hitherto all her thoughts had been concentrated upon getting away from her step-

mother, and nothing else had mattered. With that fear removed, the problem of existence became acute.

"Maybe we can find a place to ranch. That's what I've been thinking," returned Francet. "I've heard a lot about the foothills country. They say there are some great places there."

"The foothills country?" asked Margaret, not understanding.

"The hills just before you get to the real mountains," he explained. "They say they get warm spells there in the winter and the snow melts. That means less hay to put up."

"It's a long way," Margaret said doubtfully.

"I don't know. Not so far," replied Francet. "Maybe two or three hundred miles, maybe five. I don't see that matters. We've got lots of grub, and we can always get some more, and all the summer to travel in. A few hundred miles ain't much."

"I guess we can go there all right," agreed Margaret, as if such a journey were an every-day affair, and the matter was settled.

Francet lit the lantern and hung it to the tent pole and they began to sing. They sang, "Annie Laurie," and "My Old Kentucky Home," and "Killarney," and all the songs they knew. No one would have imagined that Margaret was a bride, and for the first time alone with her husband. Francet was just the old Francet she had always known; no different because of the few words that had joined them together as man and wife. But Francet thought of it.

"You can put that ring on now," he suggested.

"Why, I had forgotten it!" Margaret exclaimed without embarrassment. She drew the ribbon over her head and untied the knot, slipped the ring on her finger, and held it out before her to observe the effect.

"What do you think of it?" she asked. "Looks nice, doesn't it? I'll always wear it now."

Her manner and actions proclaimed an entire absence of self-consciousness. The ring was there simply to be

admired. To Francet, however, it would be a constant reminder that he had the right to protect and look after her, and he was very proud that so great a privilege was his.

Presently he took his mattress to his own sleeping place, which was under the pole of the democrat, over which he had pegged a piece of canvas. When he had forced the mattress beneath the make-shift tent, he could just crawl in, but as he was so short, the canvas protected him fully.

He lay awake for a while wondering at his own happiness, which seemed altogether too great and too wonderful to be true. He had not the slightest doubt that he would be able to find a place where they could start ranching, but they would have to take cattle on shares at first. Or if he could find no suitable spot, which was incredible, he had no doubt that in some other way he would be able to earn a living for Margaret and himself. He had nearly four hundred dollars with him, which made him feel like Midas—Francet had never thought of his horses as being worth so vast a sum. Then, too, he had Margaret all to himself to watch over. It was all very marvellous, he thought, and God was good to grant him so many blessings. He wondered if Margaret was comfortable.

"Are you asleep, Margy?" he called.

A ripple of laughter answered him. "If I were how could I answer you?"

Francet thrilled at the sound of her voice—it was good to be so near her.

"Are you warm enough?"

"Heaps. How are you?"

"I'm all right."

"Good-night, Francet."

"Good-night, Margy."

Sheer ecstasy was his. Life was worth the living now! He loved her very much and humbly for the happiness she had given him, and he resolved that he would be worthy of it, would do all in his power to make her happy. Of possessing her he had no thought. The temptation did not exist for him. She seemed as remote as the stars and as inaccessible.

CHAPTER XXIII

Six weeks later Margaret and Francet were following a trail through what they were told were the foothills, although to them it seemed that they must be in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. For days they had been able to see the snow-clad peaks glistening in the sun. The trail was not such as they were used to, and they began to fear that they would have to turn back. Once, where the valley broadened out, they saw a tiny cabin, but it was across a river.

"This trail's got to lead somewhere," said Francet. "I'll bet there ain't no one making trails for fun in a country like this. And besides, it's easy to see it's had a lot of traffic over it."

Evidently they were passing through what had been forest at one time. Dismal, blackened stumps were on all sides, and the new growth was not sufficiently advanced to conceal the ravages that man and fire had made.

"Perhaps it's an old road made when logging was going on here," suggested Margaret.

But Francet would not credit it. "The tracks are fresh," he insisted. "And those trees were cut down long ago."

Toward noon Margaret sighted a building.

"What did I tell you!" cried Francet. "We'll camp when we get to it."

The building proved to be a store and post-office combined. It stood in a five or six acre field from which the stumps had been cleared, and was fenced around with poles. A gate opened into a path that led to the store. Three cows were grazing in the enclosure.

"Looks as if they did a roaring business," commented Francet.

A bell started an alarming jangle when Vedene opened the door of the store, and a woman appeared behind the counter. She stared with curious eyes at Francet whom she thought the most remarkable man she had ever seen. Strangers were always worthy of regard, she saw so few; but one like this made her speechless. She was a middle-aged woman with a worn, tired face. Her hair was drawn straight back from her forehead and pinned in a tight knot at the back of her head, and she wore a man's overalls which made her appear very small. Still staring at Francet, she recovered from her surprise sufficiently to exclaim:

"Hallo!"

"Hallo yourself!" replied Francet, who was also more than a little surprised at the appearance of the woman. He had not been sure of the speaker's sex, but the voice was unmistakable. She stooped a little, and peered through the window at the democrat outside, and her jaw dropped in amazement as she saw its occupant.

"That's a woman there!" she cried in a sharp accusing voice, as if the presence of a woman was the most extraordinary thing in the world.

"That's my wife," Vedene replied, with a pride he could not learn to control.

"Unhitch your team," she said. "Turn the horses loose, or there's hay in the barn. Then bring your woman in," and without another word, vanished through the door at the back of the store.

"We've struck some joint here," was Vedene's message to Margaret. "There's a woman in there, and she acts like she's crazy!"

"What do you mean? What happened?"

"Nothing. She acted mighty queer, that's all. I thought she was a boy till she spoke. She's got overall on and talked as if she was mad. She saw you, and then she said as if she was knocked all of a heap: 'Unhitch and bring your woman in!' Then she went out of the back door as if a bull was a-chasing her."

Margaret laughed. "That's sounds all right. It's good to be able to frighten someone."

Vedene turned the horses loose to feed, and a second time the store bell jangled out its warning as he opened the door for Margaret to enter; but no one came. After waiting awhile, they each took a seat. Vedene upon the one bare spot of the counter, and Margaret upon some sacks of sugar, just inside the entrance. The place was so packed with goods of every description that there was hardly a vacant spot in it. The silence was profound. It was impossible to imagine that they were not alone in the building.

"Are you sure there's anyone here?" asked Margaret in a whisper.

"There was a woman here unless I seen a ghost," replied Vedene, looking over his shoulder at the open door at the back of the counter. "Open the door again and make that darned bell go to beat the band!"

Margaret opened the door, but the clamour of the bell produced no results.

"I'll go out and have a look around," said Vedene. "Maybe there's someone out at the barn."

But Margaret had grown nervous. "You had better stay here," she advised.

Then they heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and the strange woman appeared at the end of the passage which was visible through the door behind the counter. She was clad now in a print dress, and wore a large, white apron. Even her hair was arranged differently. Some of the tiredness had vanished from her expression, and she smiled timidly, as though not sure of her welcome. As she advanced, her pace gradually slackened, and picking up her apron she plucked nervously at its edges. Not for a moment did she take her eyes from Margaret's face. She reached the door, and stood on the threshold, as if lacking the power to advance farther, and in a totally different tone from that she had used when speaking to Vedene, asked quietly and shyly: "Won't you come in?"

Francet descended from the counter, flashing a glance of inquiry at Margaret.

But Margaret could see that whatever was wrong with the woman, she was, at least, not dangerous. She passed around the end of the counter with Vedene at her heels. The woman turned and led the way to a room which Margaret perceived was the usual combination of kitchen, dining and sitting-room. She placed a chair for Margaret with fluttering hands, disregarding Francet utterly. She stood looking down at the girl with eyes that brimmed over with tears. Margaret had left her hat on the seat of the democrat and the strange woman put out her hand and very gently touched the girl's hair, as if to assure herself that she was not being deceived by a vision. Then suddenly she collapsed in a chair, covering her face with her hands, and began to cry quietly. Francet vanished.

"Why do you cry?" asked Margaret, wondering at her emotion.

The woman picked up her apron and dabbed at her eyes with it. "You must think I'm crazy," she stammered through her tears. "But I just couldn't help it, and that's all there is to it! It's over five years since I saw a woman or spoke to one. I just couldn't help myself, and I couldn't speak, because I was all a-fluttering inside. I guess you think I'm crazy," she repeated, "but you don't know how I've longed to see another woman. And you're young and pretty, and I just couldn't help myself, and that's all there is to it! You ain't mad at me, are you? And I'm such a fool! I just had to fix myself all up. I ain't fixed myself for years."

CHAPTER XXIV

MRS. WILLIAMS would not hear of Margaret and Vedene leaving right away. She prepared a huge meal for them, and gave them some information about the adjacent country. "There ain't no place here for cattle like you're looking for," she told them. "All the people around here are carving places out of the bush and turning 'em into orchards. They're all bachelors and are scattered along the flats. There's a saw-mill about five miles along the trail, where the creek what runs in this valley goes into the river. Right there is where the railroad is too." It appeared that Mr. Williams had gone there for more supplies for the store. "This here store helps us out quite a bit," said Mrs. Williams. "The orchard won't be bearing for a year or so yet, and we wouldn't a' been able to stick it out if it hadn't a' been for the store. And then we've got the three cows and some pigs, and I guess we're a-going to make it go. It wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't so darned lonely. Maybe some time these here bachelors will be getting a woman, but it's fierce now! When I saw you through the window I was just knocked all of a heap!"

"We might as well turn back," said Francet. "I've heard a lot about these here mountains but I can see it's no place for us."

"You'd better wait till my man gets back," Mrs. Williams advised. "Maybe he can tell you what to do. You ain't in any hurry, are you?"

"We've got all the time there is," said Vedene. "I guess the cayuses can do with a rest anyway. These here trails are hard on their feet—they ain't like the prairie trails."

Late in the afternoon the bell in the store warned them of a newcomer.

"I guess that will be Mr. Williams," said Margaret.

"No, that won't be my man yet. Too early. He can't get back yet awhile. That's somebody after grub or something," said Mrs. Williams.

"Hallo! What'n Sam Hill's happened to you?" came an astonished voice from the store. "Golly!" the voice continued. "What you celebrating? What's happened to the overalls?"

"You mind your own business and never mind about my overalls, Mr. McCool," was the sharp retort.

"Now, now! Don't you get sore!" entreated the newcomer. "'Tain't my fault you going and pretty nearly knocking my eyes out, is it? You wouldn't expect me to say nothing when you're all spruced up, would you? And, say, ain't you the nifty one too!"

"Now quit that," exclaimed Mrs. Williams very good-humouredly. "Quit your joshing. An old fool like you talking that way! What d'you want?"

"I ran out of chewing, blast it!" explained Mr. McCool. "And now I'm here, I might as well take back a sack of flour and ten pounds of beans."

"Come and get your flour while I fix up the beans. Have you got enough sow-belly?"

"I'm well fixed for sow-belly," Mr. McCool returned. "Who's the democrat and the cayuses belong to?"

"Couple that pulled in this forenoon."

"What are they figgering on doing?"

"Turning back."

"Best thing they can do. Where are they now?"

"They're right in the kitchen."

"Well, fetch 'em out and let's have a look at 'em."

"If you want to see 'em you walk right out in the kitchen. And mind you don't spit on the floor, or I'll have you out of there so quick it will make your head swim."

Mr. McCool did not reply, and a moment afterward stood in the doorway of the kitchen staring at Margaret.

"Gosh darn it! Why didn't you tell me there was a lady in here!" he gasped, pulling his cap from his white head and beginning to retreat backwards.

"You needn't be afraid of me," said Margaret. "I'm well broken and quite harmless."

She smiled as she spoke, and the friendliness of her tone and her quaint greeting overcame McCool's embarrassment somewhat. He advanced into the room, apparently doubtful whether to offer his hand or not, and Margaret put an end to his uneasiness by leaving her chair and offering hers.

"Gosh darn it!" exclaimed McCool. "I guess I'm acting like a rube, as if I didn't know nothing. I ain't seen a young woman for so long that when I laid eyes on you I was knocked cock-eyed!"

He took her hand and pumped it up and down, then suddenly dropped it, and looked ruefully at his begrimed and calloused fingers. "I wouldn't have offered it to you," he said, "but it's the only kind I have around." Then he took notice of Francet. "Hallo, stranger. Hope I see you well? Where you heading?"

"We ain't heading nowhere. We're just looking around. We figgered on starting up ranching but I guess we've come too far into these here mountains. We'll have to go back a-piece."

"Well, what kind of a ranch are you looking for? There's all kinds of ranches around here. Least, they're going to be ranches some day when they get the dog-goned trees off 'em and the blasted stumps blown out. Is that the kind of a ranch you mean?"

"It ain't," ejaculated Francet. "That's not in our line. We want a place where we can keep a bunch of stock and where there's lots of hay."

"Oh!" exclaimed McCool. "That's the kind of a ranch you mean, is it? Well, sir, I'll tell you something. You made a bum guess when you blew in here a-looking for a joint of that kind. You want to beat it back about a hundred miles or so and get a-looking around. You

may find something there. Where d'you say you was from?"

Neither Margaret nor Vedene had said anything of the place they had left, but Margaret guessed that this was Mr. McCool's manner of asking.

"Saskatchewan," she answered.

"Umph!" said McCool. "Not for minel!" He took a chair and stretched his legs out before him.

"What do you do for a living?" asked Francet.

"He just bums around," Mrs. Williams answered.

"Bums around!" gasped McCool, indignantly. "If you think it's so soft washing about two tons of sand a day and maybe getting a dollar's worth of gold out of it, why don't you go to it? I notice there ain't any stampede along the river. Lots of guys drift in and try it, but they damned soon get fed up and blow out again."

"Gold!" exclaimed Francet.

"Yes, gold!" retorted McCool with asperity. "Just wash the sand and ladle up the gold! Sounds easy, don't it?" He snorted in contempt, and his white eyebrows appeared to bristle as he glared at Francet.

"Could I do it?"

"You! Why, sure! Sure you could! Anyone can do it! There's all kinds of sand in the river! All you've got to do is to shovel enough sand every day while the water's low to fill this dog-goned house and maybe you'll get a dollar and maybe you'll get two. And some days when you're damned lucky, once in a year perhaps, you'll get a five spot out of it. There's lots of room for you on the river!"

"Will you show me how to do it?"

McCool entered into a long explanation which completely mystified his hearers. Their failure to understand his technical terms and phrases irritated him.

"Gosh darn it!" he cried. "If you don't understand that, you've got me beat!"

"Shut up, you old fool!" Mrs. Williams interjected. "You've lived so long alone that's all you're fit for. Can't

you see they don't know nothing about it, and all the lingo you're spilling is just so much Indian?"

"Well, I'm through talking anyway," said McCool in disgust. "If you want to see how to do it, and you fancy a light job, you come along with me and I'll put you wise."

"What do you think of it, Margy?" asked Vedene.

"We might try it," she said. "We've got to do something."

"Try anything once," commented McCool. "It can only kill you!"

Mrs. Williams stood in the door in all the glory of her best dress as the democrat moved away.

"You'll come in on your way back anyway, won't you, Mrs. Vedene?" she asked.

"She wouldn't pass you up for anything," replied McCool scornfully. "She won't see a woman like you very often!" Margaret understood that this was his method of retaliation.

"I'll come whether we go or stay," Margaret assured her.

"You'll have to if you want any grub," commented McCool.

The three of them packed themselves into the seat of the democrat. McCool had lashed his sack of flour to the saddle of his old pony which ambled along behind.

"This here trail," said McCool, "was made when the woods here was logged off, and it's kept open by the traffic to the store. They floated the logs down that there creek to the mill. You'll be able to see the mill easy from my shack. It was started by old man Blake, and he's one hell of a man too, I'll tell you! Now he's got the kid in it too, and they're getting logs all around. I guess they're making a bunch of money."

"Can you make very much in a year, enough to keep you, out of this gold-washing?" asked Vedene.

"I'm rotten with money—like old man Blake," growled McCool. Any reference to his manner of making a living appeared to exasperate him. "I guess it'll pan out about

a dollar, or a dollar fifty a day though. You can only wash when the water's low and the sand-bars are dry. Most winter's they all freeze up and a lot of the summer they're under water. If it wasn't for that you could work yourself to death."

"If it comes to that much we'll stay," declared Vedene to whom a dollar and a half a day most of the year appeared to be very good wages indeed. "You bet your life we'll stay!"

"You will, will you?" said McCool, with an indignant snort. "See here, sonny! I'm an old man. Leastways, I'm over sixty, how much I don't know—maybe three or four years, maybe more. I've tramped these here dog-goned hills for somewheres about forty years, right down South and right away up North to the Arctic Circle, and I'm hardened to it: I'm tougher'n whalebone. And right now, I'll bet you five dollars I could grab holt of you and pull you apart and stick you together again and not know I'd done anything. And I'm telling you that that blasted sand'll get your goat! I can't stand it regular. The only thing about it is, it's steady, and you can always get a living at it, and you don't have to go asking for no job off'n nobody and that's what makes me stick it. I can't tramp the blasted hills no more, and I never did have no luck in 'em anyway."

"I can try it," said Vedene stoutly, upon whom the responsibility of seeking a living rested heavily.

"And it's a hell of a place to live," said McCool. "I get fed up sometimes. Then I get on the train and beat it for town and go on the toot."

He sank into a meditative silence.

"I'm getting past it, though," he continued presently. "It's hell, this getting old. I don't seem to be able to stand it like I used. Some day they're going to come to the shack and find this old bird has pulled his freight. And it'll be a damned good job too!"

The twilight came very rapidly with the sinking of the sun behind the mountains. The sombre hills seemed to

close in and envelop them in a heavy, brooding silence. The trees close at hand appeared to Margaret like grim sentinels. There was something mysterious in the shaded depths beneath them.

"Is it far now?" she asked.

"About a mile," McCool answered.

The trail began to ascend. There were no level spaces, and the road, carved from the face of the hill, rose steeply. Presently the trail made a sharp turn and came to an end on a little flat. Margaret could see a broad expanse of water, bordered on this side, with what she knew must be either meadow or muskeg. On the opposite bank lights flickered in a cluster of cabins. The democrat stopped beside a little shack built of rough, unpainted boards.

"Here's the joint," said McCool. "You can cut the horses loose. They'll go down on the flats there. Lots of eating down there for horses and no danger of 'em straying away. There's nothing for 'em in the woods. That old hay-rack of mine wouldn't go away."

McCool descended from the democrat.

"Gosh!" he complained. "I'm getting stiff, ain't I? He helped Vedene unhitch the team, and they all walked with the horses to the edge of the meadow, where the animals were turned loose. Then they stood on the bank and gazed across the river. The lights from the cabins on the opposite shore made long, yellow paths across the dark water, which appeared to be almost stagnant. There was not a ripple on it.

"This here's what we call Lazy River. The creek we was following is called Foaming Creek, and it runs into the river just above. Of course them ain't the names what's on the map, but that's the names of 'em around here. Those lights over there is where the mill is, and the bunk-houses. Old man Blake's got a bunch of Chinks a-working. They're all Chinks mostly, curse 'em. But he don't care who he hires as long as they're cheap. The money is all he's after and to hell with the country!"

McCool spat and turned toward his shack. "You'll be able to see it all better in the morning."

Margaret expected to see the interior of the shack as neglected looking as its owner. She was surprised, however, to see that the old prospector's abode was spotlessly clean. Even the few cooking utensils hanging upon the wall behind the stove were scoured. The building was only about twelve feet square, built of a double thickness of wide boards that ran from the floor to the plate that supported the roof. Against one of the walls was a wide bunk. A table covered with white oil-cloth stood in the centre of the floor and there was a single stool. There were, however, some boxes that could be utilized as seats. Shirts and old overalls and a few coats hung upon nails driven into the door.

McCool made a fire in the stove, and as soon as it began to burn, the chill of the high altitude was put to flight, and the door had to be opened.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked McCool. "Some joint, eh? Do you feel like eating?"

"Not I, thank you," said Margaret. "I couldn't eat anything. Mrs. Williams was too good to us."

"Nor me," said Vedene.

"Well, I ain't so particular myself," said McCool. "What the mischief did I make that fire for? It'll soon go out anyway; there's only kindling on it. We may as well fix up for the night. The bunk's pretty narrow for two, though."

"I won't turn you out of your bunk," said Margaret. "We'll put up the tent just as we've been doing since we've been on the trail."

But McCool's ideas of hospitality were outraged. "Nothing doing!" he declared. "I ain't so fond of a dog-goned tent. I've had all the tenting I want, but I ain't a-going to sleep in a comfortable bunk while a lady hikes off to a tent! No, indeed!"

The tent was erected and McCool's blankets were carried into it, while Margaret's bedding was placed in the

bunk. Vedene opened his bed beside McCool's, much to the old man's mystification. He said nothing until he and Vedene were beneath the blankets and the lantern had been turned out. Vedene was half asleep when the old prospector's voice recalled him.

"That's a fine young woman," he said.

"You bet!" Vedene agreed, instantly wide awake.

"Did you say she was your woman?"

"Yes."

"God Almighty!" ejaculated McCool. "The luck some men have! And what the hell are you doing sleeping here?"

"We ain't married thataways," explained poor Francet. "We got married so as we could go away together and so as I could look after her."

"You look after her!" growled McCool, more mystified than ever. "Ain't you married at all, then?"

"We went to church."

"Aw, hell!" ejaculated the old man. "A hell of a note! Why, you ain't married at all!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE roar of steam escaping from the engine at the mill aroused Margaret. She could hear, too, the voices of Francet and McCool.

It was a beautiful morning and the moist, keen air was laden with the scent of pine and fir. A thin, pearly mist hung over the flats and river.

"How d'you make out?" asked McCool. "Sleep good?"

"I had no idea you had a spring in the bunk," said Margaret. "It seemed almost too soft at first, after sleeping on the ground so long; but I soon got used to it."

"Well, I didn't get used to the ground," McCool remarked dryly. "Gosh darn it! I'm getting too old and too stiff I guess. It took about half an hour to get the kinks out of my back this morning. Just the same I'm glad you slept all right."

He kindled a fire in the stove.

"Porridge and pork and bannock, or bannock and pork and porridge?" he inquired.

"Which would you like, Francet?" Margaret asked with mock gravity.

"Francet!" repeated McCool. "You must be French, sonny."

"I don't know if I am," demurred Francet.

"You don't know if you are? Then how did you get that name?"

"I don't know, nohow."

McCool regarded him with curiosity. "You don't seem to know much, do you?"

"I'd like to know more," answered Francet simply, an answer that caused McCool to ponder.

The silence of the valley was shattered by the shriek of the mill's siren. The sound rolled among the hills until it seemed as though a thousand mills were harshly calling men to labour. The sound took Vedene back across the fog of the years to his childhood.

"That's just like the mill used to go when I was a kid," he remarked. A few minutes afterward the saw started. He knew by the different notes of the saw as it whined or screamed or merely seemed to growl, how the cut was being made. He could see the log being ripped and shorn. The old emotions were awakened in him. "I'd like to go over there," he said.

"If you're going to stay here, we'll have to. I ain't going to do no more camping than I can help. We can build another joint like this here one. The lumber'll only cost about twenty dollars. We can float it across the river."

"We'll stay for awhile, anyway. What do you think, Margy?"

"It's nice here, and perhaps you can get some of that gold."

"We can put up a shack in a couple of days," said McCool. "Two men can put a joint like this up in a couple of days easy. Then I'll show you how to get that gold! Some gold, gosh darn it! We'll go across for that lumber right away, as soon as we've finished eating."

A sudden racket started across the river. There was loud shouting and the saw was silent. McCool chuckled.

"Something's happened over there. I'll bet old man Blake's a-cursing with the mill stopped and all those Chinks to pay!"

Margaret went down to the water's edge with the men. The mist had cleared and the whole valley was visible. It was carpeted with a dense growth of forest, and Margaret could see no break in the enclosing mountains. The river, almost three-quarters of a mile wide, made a sharp turn some distance down stream and was lost to view. Far down the valley, creeping like a snake along a narrow

shelf cut into the side of the mountain, came a train. Margaret had seen a train when she and Vedene had crossed the railroad between Calgary and Edmonton, but the sight was still wonderful to her, especially under the circumstances.

"That's the C.P.R.," said McCool, following the direction of her gaze. "Old man Blake's got a siding where he loads his cars. The station is just a fag-station—you can't see it from here, and to get to it you've got to ford Foaming Creek, just before it runs into the river. It broadens out there, and anyone can pretty well walk across it except when the flood's on. And this here Lazy River ain't so lazy when it gets around that bend a-piece. It narrows right up between two walls of rock, and where it goes through it ain't more'n forty or fifty feet wide. It gets a move on then, you bet your life! But below that it runs quiet enough, but not so quiet as it is here. And those bars you see out there is where I do me digging. You can dig all you damn well please. The river goes up and down all the time and every time those bars are covered, they're just as though you hadn't dug at all."

"Can you see them, Francet?" Margaret asked.

"No, I can't see 'em."

McCool turned to him in astonishment. "Gosh darn it!" he exclaimed. "Why man, you're a'most blind then!"

"Blind!" ejaculated Francet, more shocked than he realized. "I ain't."

"Just short-sighted," explained Margaret.

"Umph!" grunted McCool. He looked at her keenly, a picture of robust health, of physical fitness, and in the flower of her youth, then back at Francet.

"Gosh darn it!" he cried. "What the hell!" Apparently relieved, he pushed a flat-bottomed boat into the water, and told Francet to get into it.

For a little while Margaret stood at the water's edge and watched as McCool sculled the boat across the glistening water with his rough, home-made sculls. She followed the train too, till it ran across a huge trestle bridge and shortly

disappeared. The sombre, harsh, desolate beauty of the valley fascinated her.

As the boat with Francet and McCool neared the shore, raucous, discordant shouting became more evident.

"D'you hear old man Blake a-going to it?" chuckled McCool. "He's raising hell proper, ain't he?" The boat touched the gravelly bottom, and McCool leaped out, eager to get to the mill and gloat over Blake's discomfiture. Vedene followed quickly, lest he lose sight of his guide. As they threaded their way among the piles of sawn lumber, the aromatic scent in the air, the narrow aisles down which he walked, produced the illusion in Vedene's mind that he was back in the mill he had known as a child. A new idea came to him. He wondered if there was anything about the mill he could do to earn a living. The logs and the lumber appealed more to him than the idea of washing sand for gold.

"D'you think I could get a job here?" he asked.

The old prospector slackened his pace and looked back over his shoulder at the puny hunchback following him. A smile came into his eyes. He thought of old man Blake hiring such a man as this.

"God knows!" he returned.

When they reached the mill they found Blake in the shed that housed the saw—a tall, straight man, almost sixty years of age, but active yet. His grey beard was trimmed to a point which was thrust aggressively forward, and his ice-grey eyes were alive with vigour and energy as he stood under the shed while his Chinese employees darted around him furtively, desirous only of keeping beyond the lash of his tongue. He was assisting the sawyer to put in a new saw, and McCool and Vedene were beside him before he was aware of their approach. He sensed that someone had entered the shed and looked up belligerently, expecting to see a Chinaman.

"Hallo!" he greeted, his eyes flashing from McCool to Vedene, upon whom they lingered for a moment. Then he turned back to his work.

"Busted your saw?" asked McCool.

"One of those damned, slant-eyed rice-eaters left a spike in a log," Blake explained succinctly. McCool's presence appeared to have altered his mood and to have made him more taciturn.

"Anybody hurt?"

"One Chink."

"Bad?"

"Damned if I know! Didn't look at him! He's in the bunk-house if you want to see him."

McCool laughed. "One Chink the less wouldn't matter," he said indifferently.

"What d'you want?"

"Lumber to build a shack. This guy here is going to stay with me."

"What d'you want another shack for? Can't he stay in yours?"

"He's got a woman."

Blake turned to Vedene and regarded him with greater curiosity than before.

"You got a woman?" he inquired, doubting McCool's assertion.

"Yes."

Blake stared at Francet for a moment but did not speak, and Vedene could feel the cold blaze of his eyes boring into him. Then the mill owner turned to his task again, saying briskly:

"Get what lumber you want. You can tell me what you take afterwards. No use going to the office. Every damned thing's going wrong. The book-keeper has gone off on the toot—and he can stay on!" The sharp, hard, decisive tone was final.

"Is there anything I can do around the mill?" asked Vedene. "I'd take a job."

Blake shot upright again.

"You!" he exclaimed sharply, looking Vedene up and down. "And what can you do around a mill?"

"I don't know," replied poor Francet. "I'll do anything."

"He always says he don't know," chimed in McCool with a chuckle. "He don't seem to know anything, and he's half blind, and he's got a woman to keep."

"Any good at figures?"

"No, I ain't any good at figgers. I can team, I'm pretty strong."

"What's your woman like? Can she figure?" asked Blake.

"How d'you mean?" inquired Vedene. "She knows figgers. She can do sums, but she doesn't understand book-keeping. She'd come to help you out for awhile."

"If she can figure, send her over," rejoined Blake laconically. "We'll show her what to do. I'll give her a dollar a day. Maybe I'll find you a job too. If she don't come, you needn't show up."

"She'll do it to oblige you, I know," said Francet.

"Umph!" Blake growled.

"I can't start till we've got the shack up," explained Vedene.

"Don't worry about that," impatiently retorted Blake. "Send the woman over. You can take the rest of the year to build the shack if you like!"

McCool and Francet loaded the lumber upon a truck and wheeled it down to the water's edge where they made it into a raft. Margaret was all excitement at the news Francet brought.

"But I can't do it," she objected. "I know nothing about keeping books."

"He don't want you for books," said McCool. "He don't expect you to know anything about 'em. All he wants is someone to keep track of the time of the Chinks till he gets a reg'lar book-keeper I take it. They'll show you what to do."

"Well I can try," said Margaret doubtfully.

"It will only be for a few days," put in Francet, "then he'll get a man, and I'll be working then."

"Yes," agreed McCool, "you'll be working then!"

The mill whistle blew for the resumption of work for the afternoon just as Vedene drove the boat on to the bank.

Blake was on top of a pile of lumber. As Margaret and Vedene drew near, he descended a ladder and approached.

"Who's this?" he demanded, looking at Margaret keenly, and before he realized what he was doing, he had pulled off his broad-brimmed hat and bared his cropped, white head.

"My wife," said Francet simply, but with evident pride.

Blake regarded Margaret and then Vedene in bewilderment.

"Your wife!" he exclaimed.

"I've come to help you if I can," said Margaret. "I may be able to. Mr. McCool said you would show me what to do."

Blake was dumbfounded. Could such a creature as Vedene possess such a wife? His gaze wandered to her hand. The ring was there. He asked:

"What name did you say?"

"Vedene," replied Francet.

"Come with me," said Blake abruptly. "I'll show you what to do. You can go," to Francet.

He led the way to a little building, and held the door open while Margaret entered.

"There isn't much here you can do," he explained; "but you can straighten up the time-book. I suppose you can add and subtract and divide?"

"I think I can," said Margaret nervously, awed by Blake's manner.

"I don't like people who only think they can do a thing," retorted Blake irritably. "Can you do what I asked? Yes or no?"

His manner aroused Margaret's antagonism. She replied in imitation of his tone: "Yes."

"That's what I asked. Why didn't you say that at first?" But he liked the flash of her eyes. Blake then

explained tersely what he wanted done, flinging each word at her.

"Did you get all that?" he inquired at last.

"Yes."

He opened the door and stood with the handle of it in his hand, looking back, and barked:

"Quit at six. Start at seven to-morrow—on time!"

Then he went out and Margaret, standing confused and not a little frightened, saw his long lean figure go stalking back to the mill. She felt very lonely and friendless, and wished that Francet were there, but presently began to work, determined to show Blake that she could do something, could add, subtract and divide.

The afternoon was very hot and there was not a breath of air stirring in the office although Margaret had opened both the door and the window. Blake's brutal manner challenged her to do her best at her unaccustomed task and she fought down the inclination to run out of the place. Late in the afternoon the sound of a step caused her to turn quickly. She expected to see Blake, but her visitor was a young man, who appeared as much surprised to see her as she was to see him. He stood, without saying a word, looking at her.

A spasm of fear ran through the girl. She knew at once that her visitor was the mill-owner's son. There was something of the older man in his carriage, and he had the same cast of countenance. In the younger man, however, it was not so dour and bitter. He wore a blue shirt, open at the throat, overalls tucked into the inevitable high boots, and the ubiquitous broad-brimmed hat, and Margaret saw as he swept his hat from his head that his hair was fair.

For a moment Margaret had a wild desire to escape. The man's presence seemed to fill the tiny office. There was a ring of defiance in her voice as she asked, almost as a challenge:

"Yes. What do you want, please?"

Margaret reminded Dennis Blake of a trapped bird. He

was not deceived by her tone, and read in the brown eyes that were turned up to him, something of what was passing in her mind.

Why was she alarmed? he wondered. Surely his father had made a mistake. He had spoken of a married woman. This was a girl. His eyes flashed down to her hand and he saw the ring. It recalled him to himself. He said:

"I beg your pardon if I alarmed you."

"Alarmed me!" she exclaimed, eager to show that he had not alarmed her, though her fear of him was increased by the knowledge that he had read that momentary expression so quickly. "I am not alarmed."

His thin, firm lips parted in a smile.

"Well, I'm glad of that. I thought, perhaps, I had entered too suddenly, without knocking, and had frightened you."

"You did," she exploded, eager to seize on his explanation of her feeling.

"Then you were alarmed?"

She saw that he had caught her and did not reply directly.

"Can I do anything for you?" she asked, feeling that her question was ridiculous. His manner of receiving it made it appear more so.

"I'm afraid there's nothing you can do for me," he replied. "Father told me to drop in and help you. I'll be glad if you'll allow me?"

She wanted to cry out that she was not coming again—that she intended to go instantly; but could not, and found herself saying:

"It's kind of you. I'm afraid I'm not doing things very well, but I would like to try."

"I'm Dennis Blake," he exclaimed. "I'll assist you with the books. We'll manage them between us. I'm usually out in the woods, but I'll have to put more time in here and help you."

Without more ado he began to work and Margaret was surprised when the six o'clock whistle blew.

"Seven to-morrow morning," Dennis reminded her.

"I'll be here," she retorted sharply.

For a time after Margaret had left young Blake worked on in silence. Then the door was thrown open and his father entered. He took a seat on one of the stools.

"Well, what do you think of her?" he demanded, watching his son intently.

"She'll do," answered Dennis, after a pause.

"Don't fool with me," retorted the old man. "You know what I mean?"

Dennis turned on his stool. He asked, with an assumed denseness that enraged his father:

"Will you please explain exactly what you do mean then?"

"She's married! Married! And don't you forget it!" cried Blake. "And by God; wait till you see her husband!"

"I'm in no danger of forgetting she's married," Dennis replied. "A blind man could see that she's not the kind of woman who would allow one to forget."

"Umph!" growled his father. "She wouldn't be here if I thought differently. See that she earns her dollar."

"All right. You needn't worry about that. See the straightening up done already."

CHAPTER XXVI

MRS. GOULET married Joe and became Mrs. Weatherall. She was so relieved by the flight of Margaret and Vedene that she fell a willing victim to Joe's blandishments. He appeared to have only one fault. He was lazy, and Susan found it difficult to condone laziness. Nevertheless, she loved Joe so much, he so dazzled her by the extent of his knowledge and the amount of his experience, that she did excuse him. She told herself that she could hardly expect so wise a man as Joe, who had lived in magnificent hotels practically all his life, and who, according to his own account, was able to associate upon equal terms with very prominent men—Joe gave her the names—who called him "Joe," just as if he were a prominent man also, to work like an ordinary man. Susan was quite sure that if prominent men were to speak to her she would not know what to say; would only be able to stare like a fool, and she felt that she ought to be very happy and proud that such a man as Joe had married her. He would not work, but he knew so much. There was a vague disquiet in her mind at the state things gradually fell into, but she consoled herself with the reflection that so clever a man as her husband would soon put everything to rights when he wished. There were two hired men now; but Joe kept the men talking so much, they had so many funny stories to exchange, that less work was done than ever before.

At the end of three months Susan found herself watching the trail across the flats almost incessantly. There were many more visitors than there had been, Joe was so popular, and they usually stayed two or three days at a time, played cards, and some got intoxicated. The presence of Joe's friends caused Susan no anxiety. On the

contrary, she was relieved when they drew near enough for her to recognize them as friends of Joe's—suppose it had been Margaret and Vedene returning! Gradually the fear that they would return obsessed her.

As for Joe, life on the ranch bored him. No longer was he at the beck and call of an employer, nor was he haunted by a fear of losing his job, but he had lived with that fear so long that he was unconscious of ever possessing it. Now that the fear was gone, and there was nothing to drive him on, his days were lifeless. He was too stupid to be able to find an interest in making the ranch prosper. He was not a rube, he said. The truth of the matter was that he was one of those who are incapable of working for themselves. Susan irritated him, too, by worrying constantly over the possibility of Margaret's return.

"Sell the ranch," said Joe, less breezily than of yore, "and let's get out of here. We could get enough out of it to make the first payment on a hotel and then we'd make all kinds of money. Cattle increase once a year. You're tied down to that. But in a hotel, money is coming in all the time."

The idea tempted Susan and Joe followed up his advantage keenly. He was shrewd enough, however, not to press the subject too far at any one time; but by continual suggestion, and by drawing comparisons between the hard life on the ranch and the easy one they might have as proprietors of a hotel, kept the matter always in her mind. He knew that he had won when one day she asked.

"There's no one who could buy it around here?"

Joe did some strenuous thinking regarding a purchaser, and as a result of his earnest cogitations, arrived at the conclusion that there were only two men in the district who might buy the property. One of these was the lawyer in town, the other was Harry Connors, the cattle dealer, the individual who had bought Vedene's horses. Of the two Joe would have preferred to sell to the lawyer as he knew that in the matter of bargaining Harry would outwit him. But the lawyer would know about Margaret, and would,

Joe considered likely, refuse to purchase at all, unless her signature was attached to the transfer. Harry would not be so scrupulous; but Joe knew that he would take all the advantage he could from the fact that the girl was not there to make the transaction quite all that it should be. But as he could think of no other probable purchaser Joe was forced to name Harry.

"Connors would," he said in an off-hand manner, as if the idea had just occurred to him. "He's got the money or can get it."

As soon as a purchaser was named Susan hesitated.

"We'd better stay here, hadn't we?" she asked weakly. "Supposing we didn't make any money? We might lose it."

"You couldn't lose it in a hotel," cried Joe derisively. "Just think of the people coming in all the time and paying you money! Look at the bar too! Golly! It's got gold-mining beat fifty ways!"

"Then why do people sell hotels, Joe?" Susan asked.

Joe could find no ready answer, so assumed a hurt appearance, as if amazed at Susan's stupidity. Actually he was wondering, too, why hotels were ever sold. Susan felt ashamed of herself, knowing that in such matters as these, she was completely out of her depth, and hastened to show Joe that she did not doubt him.

"I guess they sell because they get tired of all the fuss going on all the time," she suggested.

"That's it," cried Joe, much relieved. "That's why it seemed so nice out here at first to me. But it's too slow! And there ain't no money in it. And besides," here he put his arm around Susan's waist and drew her to him quite gently, which Susan thought very nice of him, "I hate to see you worrying all the time whether the girl and the cripple is going to come back. You'll be much better off, living like a lady, like you ought to live, with somebody else to do all the cooking and the scrubbing. You'd be able to dress swell all the time. I'd get you some real diamond rings and a swell silk dress; and you'd be able to

wear them always and sit in the parlour. It'd be a whale of a lot better than putting in the time here fretting. Wouldn't it be hell if that girl was to come back and split the joint up, and take half the cattle and everything!"

That was the touch necessary to bring Susan to a decision.

"See what Harry will give us," she snapped.

Joe kissed her and she was glad to see him happy; glad to see the discontent fade from his fleshy countenance, and wondered how it was that she had failed to understand what had ailed him so long. Susan was very tired; felt herself in the grip of an incalculable destiny, and abandoned herself to Joe's direction with a vast relief. She was beginning to realize that every effort she had made to find a solution of her difficulties had but given birth to a new series; that the end she had looked forward to so hopefully and had sought so resolutely, had never been an end, but only a starting point for new troubles more profound than those she had sought to terminate. She realized also, that in the new life to which Joe was leading her, she was but little wiser than a child. And there was relief in that for her too, a cessation of anxiety which passed to Joe's shoulders. She conceived them to be infinitely more capable than her own of bearing a load of trouble.

The next day Joe left for town and four days elapsed before he returned. Two of these he had been compelled to waste because Connors was absent, while the other two were spent in trying to come to terms. The price Connors offered was less than a quarter of what the ranch and the cattle were worth, but he would not go beyond it. Joe was alarmed. He did not think Susan would accept such a price, and was afraid to enter any agreement without first obtaining her approval.

"Better come home and talk to the wife, Harry," he suggested. "See what she thinks. It's her place."

"No it ain't," said Harry. "Half of it, or somewhere about half, belongs to that girl, and I ain't buying that."

Harry knew Joe would accept almost any price to get

away, but was doubtful regarding Susan. Nevertheless, he determined to hear what she had to say.

"I'll go out with you all right," he answered, "but I ain't very keen on buying the joint."

When Harry told Susan what he was prepared to pay she was dumbfounded.

"Five thousand dollars," she exclaimed. "Why it's worth four times that, ain't it?" She looked from one to the other of the men in dismay. "Why, that day you saw the place for the first time, Joe, you said it was worth twenty or more."

Joe had lost his breeziness of manner entirely.

"Five thousand is a lot of money," he said oracularly.

Connors came to his rescue. "I don't know what it's worth. Maybe it's worth twenty-five thousand, if you can find anyone to pay that much. I ain't going to. Suppose I buy and then that girl comes back? What then? I'd have to give her half of the land, and I'd have to either give her half of the cattle or pay her for them. And that ain't all. Suppose she doesn't show up for five or six years; what then? Why, she can collect her share of all the money I've taken in. And God knows what else she could do. I'd advise you to start keeping books right away, even though you don't sell. If she comes back and cuts up rough, she'd be able to bust you."

Connors shrewdly guessed Susan's weak spot. At his portrayal of the situation she felt that not she, but Margaret owned the ranch. And the idea of keeping books appalled her. She felt that Harry, instead of being the robber she at first supposed him to be, was really very foolish to make any offer at all. If all these things could happen then the sooner she was away from the ranch the better. Yet a little suspicion lurked in her mind, although the expression on her husband's face confirmed Connor's gloomy prognostications. She inquired:

"What are you buying it for?"

"I ain't buying the girl's share," repeated Harry. "I told Joe that in town. If I buy, I just buy what belongs

to you. I'll go to the lawyer and get it fixed up. Whatever he says goes. It'll take a lot of time and some money though. The same with the cattle. I'll keep books and know just where I stand, so that I can pay the girl just what's coming to her, when she turns up. Maybe she won't be satisfied, and take it into the courts, and that'll cost money. Damn it!" he exploded. "When I think of all the things that may happen, I think I'm crazy to take a chance on the joint. The way things are fixed there's no telling what she'll do. She may stir up so much trouble that I'd go broke. And all the time, whether she comes back or not, I'd be expecting her to."

Susan was dismayed. If all these things could happen to Harry, what could happen to her? She knew that she was floundering out of her depth, imagined herself entangled in that dark mystery, the law, and was utterly bewildered and perplexed. The eventualities were overwhelming.

She looked appealingly at Harry and then at Joe, but there was no comfort for her in either of them.

"You see how it all is," Joe said with an air of profound wisdom.

"I'm laying all the cards on the table," continued Harry. "I'm just taking a gamble that the girl doesn't come back. If she does, I don't make nothing, if she don't, I will."

"Five thousand is a lot of money," repeated unctuously. He, too, was shocked at the risks involved in staying on the ranch. The idea that the money being received for stock was not his wife's only and that they could be held to an accounting troubled him. "Take it, Susan," he said persuasively.

Susan had decided. The ranch was no longer hers; not even the money received was hers. To think that Margaret could demand a share of all that had been received since Goulet's death was the last straw.

"All right," she agreed. "You can have it."

Harry could hardly believe his ears. Actually, he did not expect Margaret to return, but if she were to, he was quite safe—the amount he was paying was far below what

Susan's share of the property was worth. He sold the cattle as soon as Susan and her husband left the ranch. The land he held for three years, then sold that too, but at a low price, and netted a profit of close upon fourteen thousand dollars, upon the transaction.

Susan was troubled about her brother. She knew that he could live, but that his existence would be a meagre one. She confided to Joe—who gave her a queer look—that she would like to do something for Steve. Stephen's fate did not trouble Joe at all. From the height of his own prosperity he looked down on Macdonald and privately designated him a "bum."

"What do you want to do?" he inquired, afraid that his wife was going to suggest that Stephen be taken with them. That idea, however, had not occurred to Susan. Five thousand dollars, although but a fraction of the sum she had been led to believe the ranch was worth, appeared, nevertheless, a vast sum of money to her. So vast an amount that she felt she and her husband would never be able to exhaust it.

"I'd like to give him a cheque for five hundred dollars, Joe," she said a little breathlessly, doubtful as to how Joe would receive the news.

"Umph!" grunted Joe a little sourly in spite of his effort to take the matter philosophically. Now that the cash was in the bank he began to imagine it was his, especially as it was his privilege to write the cheques. It was as though Susan was proposing to take five hundred dollars of his money. He could see that five hundred disappearing. Yet he knew that he had to step warily in the matter and conceived a scheme worthy of him.

"That'd be a good idea," he said with every appearance of enthusiasm. "Steve would always remember you then. Not many brothers have got a sister to do a thing like that! Give him the cheque just before we go."

Susan was much relieved.

"Oh, Joe," she cried admiringly. "I'm lucky to have a man like you."

"And me to have a woman like you," replied Joe, not to be outdone.

The day before they left the ranch Susan gave Stephen the cheque. Joe explained the writing upon it and Stephen was so amazed, he could hardly speak. He could say still less when he presented it, and found that there was no money to meet, Joe having very thoughtfully closed the account. Stephen could not write, so had no means of letting his sister know what had happened, nor could she write to him, and they never met again. Joe lost the money playing poker.

They paid four thousand dollars out of their remaining capital as first payment on a hotel in a village along the main line of the Canadian Pacific. The unpaid balance amounted to eleven thousand dollars, on which they paid eight per cent interest. The hotel was not worth more than half the money. There was a growing town at the next station and most of the farmers preferred to make the longer journey there, where there were more stores. The hotel had been erected in the cheapest possible manner and was already falling into decay and needed constant repairs. The rooms were seldom occupied, and the furniture was soiled and practically worn out. The only time of the year when any quantity of business was done was in the fall. Then, because there were two elevators in the village, farmers coming in with their grain patronized the bar.

But for a time Susan lived what she imagined was the life of a lady. She did not have the diamond rings Joe had promised. He told her that he would buy them as soon as he had worked the business up, but that time never came. He did buy her a silk dress, however, of which she was inordinately proud, and clad in it, she sat day after day in the shabby parlour of the hotel in lonely grandeur. She conceived it to be beneath her dignity to pass the time sewing, and no other amusement was possible to her. Her mind often travelled back to the ranch with longing, and she wondered what was happening to it. She wondered more and more, too, when money was going to

start pouring in. Some did come in, it is true, but it all had to be paid out either in the form of wages or in other ways. They were supposed to pay the interest on the amount left owing on the hotel and part of the principal half-yearly. Joe, however, did not take in more than enough to meet running expenses, so at the end of a year they were turned out of the hotel practically penniless.

In Winnipeg Joe obtained a job as clerk again, and was very glad to get it. His ideas regarding hotels having altered, he would not have changed positions with the proprietor.

Susan was his one care, he looked upon her as one would a bond of a company that has failed. They had a little furnished room, in which Susan was thoroughly cramped and miserable. The rent Joe had to pay for this accommodation troubled him, as did also the expense of keeping Susan in what seemed to him luxurious idleness. There seemed no reason why she should not earn some money, so he procured for her the position of scrub-woman at the hotel. As Susan by this time was ready for anything rather than languish through the long, blank days in her furnished room, she was glad to take it. But the period of loafing had softened her. She found scrubbing endless passages and seemingly countless rooms hard work. While resting one day in the middle of a passage the proprietor caught her. He saw only a thin, middle-aged, half-breed woman, whose hair was fast turning grey, loafing, and so wasting his money. He said curtly:

"What d'you think you're doing? Scrub or get out!"

For a moment Susan's eyes flashed with something of their old fire. Hate blazed out of them. In a moment, however, they were humble again, and she was sousing the water over the floor. Her fate seemed a very miserable one indeed to her, and she wondered what she had done to deserve it.

CHAPTER XXVII

WHEN McCool said: "Why, you must be blind!" Francet had paid no attention; but the words returned to him so persistently after a time that he began to have doubts himself; he remembered a time when the cobwebs had crowded less closely upon his sight than they did now. Sometimes as he lay in his bunk he would close his eyes and imagine a life passed in an increasing darkness, and the sweat would start upon his brow.

Three book-keepers had been hired by Blake and discharged for one reason or another, and Margaret stayed on at the office. Through diligent application she was becoming more efficient, and Blake had not bothered to hire a fourth man. There was a certain amount of comfort for Francet in the thought that if he was going blind Margaret would be able to earn a living; but the thought of becoming dependent upon her was intolerable.

One evening, when Margaret had retired early and McCool had gone to the store, Francet conceived the idea of testing his sight. He drove a sharpened stake into the ground at a distance of perhaps a hundred and fifty feet from the shack, and into a notch he had cut at the top of the stake, inserted a piece of paper. Francet then placed his back to the wall of the building, but the stake was too far away; he could not see the paper. Foot by foot then, he brought the stake closer, till at last the paper at the top became visible. He left the stake standing—no one was likely to notice it in the spot he had chosen—but put the paper carefully away, intending to repeat the experiment at the end of three months.

Francet's work at the mill consisted of hauling lumber from the saw to the yard where it was piled, or of loading cars on the adjacent siding. He was wise enough to allow

the horses, which were familiar with the work, to follow the road without attempting to guide them. The nodding heads of the team appeared to him to be enveloped in a haze and beyond them, practically a blank. Teams and wagons returning to the mill loomed up out of the mist suddenly, and Francet lived in a constant fear of some day colliding with one of them. He knew what Blake would do then, had doubts whether he would be allowed to remain about the mill.

There were a number of white men in addition to Vedene driving teams. From the day of his arrival he had excited their curiosity, and had become the butt for their jokes. As this was no different, however, from the treatment to which he had been accustomed all his life Francet paid no particular attention to it. His efforts to handle heavy, green lumber as fast as the other men afforded them vast amusement, and they worked harder than before, so that Francet was forced to redouble his efforts to keep up with them. He could not see who was watching him; whether Blake was standing by, but knew that he had to keep up with the other men, or take his chance of being discharged.

With the coming of his fear of blindness he had lost confidence in his ability to earn a living. It was of no use now to think of starting a ranch. If he was discharged from the mill he had no idea what to do. All these fears were reflected in his manner.

One day he wandered down to the bank of the river after eating his lunch, and seated himself upon a log. He was utterly weary and dreaded the shrill blast of the whistle which would call him back to labour. The day was hot, but a pleasant coolness came from the river, and Francet almost fell asleep.

He was aroused to find himself surrounded by a number of the teamsters.

"Hallo, boys," he said affably, blinking at them. "Nice down here by the water."

A guffaw of laughter was his answer, and Francet knew that something unusual was afoot, that the men were bent

on mischief, and realized instinctively that he was to be the victim of whatever they had in mind.

"Now then, no rough stuff!" he warned, brushing the hank of grey hair from his forehead apprehensively.

A hulking youth answered derisively: "We ain't going to pull anything rough, Francet. Nothing at all! But you seem so damned fond of the water we've made up our minds you ought to take a dip. It'll cool you off!"

"I ain't so hot. I don't want no dip," replied Vedene, looking from face to face helplessly. There was no one there to whom he could appeal, and it did not occur to him to cry out for assistance.

"I can't swim, boys," Francet warned them. "Don't get a shoving me in there."

"Aw, just a dip and out again. It'll make you feel fine," laughed the fellow gripping Francet by the collar and drawing him to his feet. "Don't get a-struggling," he ordered. "We're just going to put you on one of these here logs and give you a ride."

"Like hell you are!" cried Francet. "Let me go or I'll wallop you one!"

There was a shout of laughter at this, and mocking cries of: "Paste him one, Francet! Don't let him put anything over on you."

Vedene's tormentor paid no attention to his victim's threat. "You need a bath," he taunted. "You ain't scared of a drop of water, are you?" and before Francet could grasp his intention the man had picked him up in his arms.

"Let go!" yelled Francet, but the other began to walk to the water's edge. Francet pummelled his face, and the blood spurted from the man's nose.

"Damn you!" he cried, angered at the laughter of his companions which was now turned upon him. "Damn you! You're going to get it now!" and holding Vedene over the water as one would a baby, dropped him beside a log.

For a moment the green water closed above Vedene's

head. The river, glacier fed, was ice-cold, and the shock of his sudden immersion jerked his jaws apart. He came up choking, but threw an arm across the log beside him with the instinct of the drowning; hung there amid the taunts and the guffaws of laughter from the group on the bank; his wet hair hanging across his face like a plaster. Recovering a little, he opened his eyes, and tried to raise himself upon the log, which at once began to roll, so that he sank again. Although the bank was only a few feet from him it might as well have been a mile.

"Haul him out now," said one of the men. "He's had enough."

"Like hell he has!" shouted the man who had dropped Francet in. "We ain't had no sport yet. The little cuss ain't going to drown. I'll get him out when I'm good and ready. He's going to pay for that wallop on the nose he gave me."

Francet was paying. He could have mounted the log by going to the end of it, but he did not know that, and persisted in his attempt to climb upon it from the side. Time after time he went under. The icy water numbed him; even panic began to disappear from his mind, and his futile struggles to grow feeble.

The group watching him were so occupied that they did not hear the rapid approach of Dennis Blake.

"Here! What are you up to?" he demanded.

The bully turned on him. "Sousing him," he muttered sullenly.

"Then take a dip yourself," cried Dennis. He was higher up the bank than the other, launched himself from his place of vantage, and the bully went into the river with a mighty splash. The rest of the group vanished.

Dennis reached out over the water and managed to catch the end of the log to which Francet still clung. Drawing it to the bank, he lifted Francet from the water and laid him on the ground.

Vedene appeared to have collapsed, and Blake stood thinking, puzzled what to do with him. He did not like

Francet. He knew, and all the men in the camp knew, of the peculiar relationship that existed between Francet and Margaret. McCool had told them, but Francet made no secret of it. To young Blake, however, the affair appeared monstrous. He was convinced that in some inconceivable way, Francet had entrapped Margaret into the marriage, being quite unable to imagine that such a girl would otherwise have become the wife—even in name only—of such a man as Francet. As Blake pondered, perplexed by the thoughts that flashed through his mind, he found a grim satisfaction in the weakness of Francet. His was the pride of the strong. Swayed by motives he could not have analyzed, Dennis picked Francet up and made for the office.

His path lay through the yard, and the whistle blew as he passed the shed which housed the saw. He was aware of the glances of those he passed; the blank stare of the Orientals, and the amused expression in the eyes of the men of his own colour, who understood instinctively, if somewhat vaguely, the motive which prompted his action. It was the strong man's protest at the woman of his choice becoming the mate of such a weakling as Francet; the blind desire to punish her. Dennis was aware of a fierce satisfaction in being able to carry the limp, bedraggled and dripping Vedene so easily. He walked with long, rapid strides, a spring in each step, as if to proclaim how little he was burdened, and was quite unconscious that the water dripping from Francet was penetrating his own clothes.

He met his father, and the old man eyed his son with curiosity.

"What's up?" he asked. "What's happened?"

"Big Tom Mann threw him in the river and kept him there till he was pretty well drowned. I'm taking him to his wife."

"Umph!" growled Blake. "What can she do for him? Prop him against a pile of lumber in the sun. He'll soon come all right."

Dennis shook his head. "I'll take him to her," he said, in a tone that was final.

"Umph!" exclaimed his father again. "Put the runt down and let him come to by himself. Don't bother with him."

But Dennis was already marching on, and for a moment, the elder Blake stood and stared after him.

When Dennis reached the office Margaret was leaning over her desk busily engaged at her books. She had been so intent that she had not heard the sound of Blake's approach, who stood in the door for a few seconds before she turned, sensing that someone was behind her.

If Dennis had expected her to cry out he was disappointed. Her face paled, however, and her wide-open eyes stared at him with mute inquiry. Yet he felt that she understood, read something of what was passing in his mind; the pride in his own strength; the half contemptuous pity for Francet; and knew his motive for bringing her husband to her better than he did himself.

Dennis felt ashamed; the triumph left his eyes. He laid Francet upon the floor in the path of the sunlight streaming through the window, and told Margaret what had occurred; omitting to mention, however, what he had done to Mann.

Margaret did not appear to listen. She was down on her knees beside Francet, running her fingers through his wet hair, brushing it back from his forehead, and calling him by name. The accent she used to the sodden and senseless man upon the floor, went through Dennis like an electric shock.

"Can I do anything?" he asked.

She looked up. "What can you do?"

"I can row you across the river and carry him home for you. He won't be able to work to-day."

"That's kind of you," she said, slowly. "But there's the books, and your own work. What would your father say? I think Francet will be all right soon."

"I can do nothing then?"

"Nothing. He's coming round now. He'll be all right soon."

Dennis turned towards the door.

"I should have thanked you," she said. "You have been very kind."

CHAPTER XXVIII

It was time for the second test, but Francet could find no opportunity of making it as he dared not risk having a witness of his experiment. He solved the problem by pretending to be ill, and so staying away from the mill for an afternoon.

Francet took his square of paper from its hiding place, hunted for the stake, which he had some difficulty in finding, and inserted the paper in the notch at its top with fingers that trembled.

He stood facing the wall of the building for a few moments before he could gather courage to turn and make the trial. He was weak with apprehension and rested his brow against the boards. At last, resolute to know his fate, he turned, but could see no trace of the stake or of the paper. He gazed to the right and to the left hoping that he had been mistaken in the direction of the stake, but knowing that the hope was futile. He could see nothing but the eternal haze. Only partly aware of his action, he rubbed his eyes and blinked them rapidly, but without result. Still fighting against the bitter truth, hope came to him that perhaps the stake had fallen. It had stood for three months; but hoping against hope, he endeavoured to persuade himself that it might have fallen at last. As he plunged forward his knees trembled and he swayed drunkenly, but with a prodigious effort held himself upright.

"You're scared, Francet, old boy," he breathed. "You're scared stiff!"

Recovering control of himself a little, he staggered forward till he ran across the stake, which he moved three paces nearer the shack. "I'll be able to see it here, all right," he said stoutly, but without confidence. This

time he compelled himself to turn without hesitation; prolonged uncertainty was more fearful than realization of the worst; but the paper was still invisible. Francet leaned against the wall of the shack nauseated.

The light was out, and except for the shaft of moonlight shining through the window the shack was in darkness. McCool was asleep, and snoring. Occasionally he turned restlessly and the springs beneath him creaked. Francet had recovered from his panic a little, but sleep would not come to him.

He had helped Margaret to prepare the supper as usual, had forced himself to eat, and neither of his companions dreamed what the effort cost him. When the light had been turned out the darkness was like a friendly cloak beneath which he was able to strip the mask from his face.

The overwhelming doom that hung over him engendered a mad exultation, and an insane longing took possession of him to kiss his wife while he could still see her. It did not occur to him to ask Margaret for a kiss. His mind was so humble, he could not conceive her granting his request; the kiss would have to be stolen.

Stealthily Francet left his bed, and dressing himself except for his heavy boots, tip-toed across the floor, opened the door, and was outside in the scented night.

It was a night made for love. The stars burned in the cloudless sky above the snow-clad, glittering mountains, and moonlight flooded the world. The river was a silver flood, and the dark woods hinted at mystery.

The beauty of the night was invisible to Francet, yet the spirit of it intoxicated him, so that his heart beat fast, and the blood leaped in his veins. Nevertheless, as he placed his hand upon the handle of Margaret's door, his fingers trembled. Not once since he and McCool had built the little shack and yielded it to her, had he or the old prospector crossed the threshold, and Francet had the feeling

of one who invades a holy place. It seemed a stupendous deed he was about to do and he was amazed that he could contemplate it, yet he turned the handle and went in, closing the door behind him almost without a sound.

He paused again, not irresolute, but because for a moment he could see nothing. It seemed to him, too, that the noise of opening and closing the door had been startling. He held his breath expecting Margaret to cry out, but not a sound came to him; he could not hear even so much as her breathing. As he leaned against the door, waiting in breathless expectancy for the sound of her voice, his eyes became accustomed to the light and shadow within the shack.

Through the window a shaft of moonlight streamed, and Francet could see the bed against the opposite wall although the moonlight did not reach it, but fell upon the rough boards of the floor, painting them silver. He could see the mound of the lower part of Margaret's body beneath the clothes; her dress and underwear neatly folded lying across the back of the one chair which stood at the edge of the shaft of light so that the white garments were touched with it. There seemed to Francet to be a subtle fragrance in the room, and it went to his head like a strong wine.

He sidled stealthily across the floor, and only the madness that was his could have supported him in this moment of high adventure—went on until at last he came to the head of the bed and looked down upon the sleeping girl. Her rich, dark hair was strewn across the pillow, and one white arm lay against her almost exposed breast. Her face was turned a little toward Francet; in the dim light it appeared almost ethereal to him. Her brows were clear and sharp as if painted upon an alabaster model, and beneath them the eyelids seemed shadowy. Only the rise and fall of her breast, and the movement of her nostrils betrayed that she breathed.

Vedene held his breath. The beauty of her seemed unearthly to him, and his dwarfed, mis-shapen, gnome-like

body swayed. He put out his hand as if to touch her, but withdrew it, trembling. His madness left him and what he had been about to do, seemed a desecration and horrible—he was not fit to steal a kiss from her. She seemed to be farther from him and above him than she had ever been, and he had made himself vile. Margaret stirred in her sleep, and panic seized him that she would awake and find him there. He drew into the shadows, but she only turned in her sleep. Francet stole out.

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CHAPTER XXIX

DENNIS was forced to spend a considerable amount of time in the office as Margaret could manage only the simpler forms of the work, but his manner was studiously precise and formal.

The vague fear that had come to Margaret when she first met Dennis had not entirely disappeared and she was a little alarmed at his influence over her. When he was in the office she lost her usual confidence—he made her nervous. His complete efficiency, too, made her conscious of her ignorance. Even his manner of speaking; his low, even tones, and his pronunciation had its effect upon her. Problems over which she had puzzled as long as she dared when presented to him seemed to dissolve, so that she wondered at her stupidity.

Occasionally she was aware that he studied her. He did it covertly, and only when he thought her engrossed in her work. But upon none of such occasions was she unaware of his gaze, although disregarding it. Once or twice, the pull of his eyes becoming intolerable, she turned and caught him, but his poise was so perfect, however, that he was able to pass the matter off each time with sang-froid.

One afternoon she noticed that he appeared less industrious than usual and that his manner was abstracted. It was a fall afternoon of brilliant sunshine, but there was an edge to the thin air.

"It'll soon be winter."

His words broke a long silence. Margaret looked up. "I suppose it will," she replied.

"It's too bad to be in here. I'm sick of this office, I'm used to being out. I want to be out. Let us go down to the river and have a walk along the bank,"

Margaret turned back to her books surprised that her heart beat so swiftly, yet Dennis had spoken only in the most careless of tones. She said:

"I have too much work."

He ejaculated impatiently in his brusque way that disdained opposition: "Nonsense! We are well up to it. There is nothing that has to be attended to at once. You have never been down the river yet, have you?"

"Not yet."

"You haven't seen what we call 'the slide' then? Where the river narrows suddenly between two walls of rock not more than forty feet apart. A tree could bridge the opening. For three or four hundred yards the river pours through a space as if through a funnel."

"We can't close up the office and go like that," she objected. "What would Mr. Blake think?"

"It's past four now. An hour and a half won't matter. I'll attend to father. He's not so frightful as you suppose."

The fair afternoon enticed her. She reasoned to herself that Dennis would be no more dangerous by the river than he was in the office, and she had implicit faith in herself and in her own strength.

"I'll come," she decided. "But we must be back before the whistle blows. Francet will be waiting."

Margaret saw his face alter at the mention of her husband's name. For the time Dennis had forgotten his existence, and the lines of his jaw became hard and grim.

"Perhaps we had better not go," she suggested. "We may not be able to get back in time."

But Dennis having obtained her promise to go, having once felt that he was going to have her to himself away from the office where the atmosphere of business was too overshadowing to be forgotten, would not let her retreat. He said, with a return to his short, abrupt tone:

"Yes, we can. It's barely a mile, and easy walking."

He did not look at her again, but lifted his broadbrimmed hat from its peg. In the glance she had of him while she was putting on her own hat, and before he left

the office to wait for her outside, she saw that the grimness had not departed from his eyes, and that his lips had not relaxed. When she went out he said curtly: "This way," and, almost as if he had forgotten her, began to cover the ground in long, rapid strides with which she had difficulty in keeping pace.

Dennis, Margaret saw, was taking a path that led away from where the men about the mill were working. They might imagine that she and Dennis were seeking to conceal their movements, and suggested:

"I think we had better go to the river through the yard. Not this way."

Blake came to a halt.

"Why?" he began, but immediately understood. "Yes, of course," he agreed. "That is the better way. Not so rough!"

Blake moderated his pace to suit hers. He said laughingly, with something of a return to a lighter manner:

"I started off too fast, didn't I?"

"A little," she admitted.

"I'm sorry. I'm so used to striding along at my own pace that I'm apt to forget."

There was no question now of concealment. The way lay directly through the busiest part of the yard. Margaret saw Francet upon a load of lumber and waved her hand to him, although she knew that he could not see her. Dennis was apparently quite oblivious of the eyes turned questioningly upon him and Margaret, and his voice seemed hard and cold as they made their way along the bank of the river. He spoke of the mill, avoiding anything that might prove embarrassing, and at last about the climate.

"Winter here is different from the winter you have been used to. Not so cold. This river, sluggish as it is here, rarely freezes over. Ice forms along the edges of it, but one can always break through it with a boat. The snowfall is much heavier; three, four or five feet on the level sometimes. Up in the hills, ten, fifteen or twenty feet."

They drew level with the sandbar upon which McCool was working, and both Margaret and Dennis returned his salutations.

"That must be hard work for an old man," Margaret ventured.

"It gives him independence."

"That's worth something."

"Yes, a lot."

A boat was being sculled up the river. The blades of the sculls left swirling circles in the apparently motionless water long after the boat had passed. The sculler turned his head and stared for a moment.

"All clear?" called Dennis.

"Yep. All clear." Mann dipped his sculls again and continued up the river.

Dennis explained Mann's duty: "Someone rows down to the slide each day to see that no timber has gathered across the opening I was telling you about. A log or an uprooted tree is sometimes caught and held there, and if we didn't get it out of the way, there would soon be a jam and no end of trouble. There isn't much danger at this time of the year; not much stuff drifting down, but in the spring we have to keep a man there constantly. The water is high and a lot of timber comes down."

"Would it matter so much if the passage were blocked?"

"In the spring the valley would be under water in two days."

Just before the slide was reached, the hills upon the opposite shore came close down to the water's edge, the river narrowed abruptly and its pace quickened, though it was still far from rapid. All trace of the handiwork of man had long been left behind. The forest here was virgin, the tall straight trees grew closely together, the lower part of their boles hidden by a dense mass of entangled fallen and decaying timber. Margaret realized how ancient the forest was. There was something pathetic to her in the sight of the fallen monarchs waiting decay and dissolution beneath the sombre shade of the upstarts they

had themselves sired. Over all was an intense silence, so profound and cathedral-like that it seemed a desecration to break it, and Dennis appeared to share her mood.

Presently they reached a spot that she knew must be the "slide".

The bank of the river rose steeply and thrust a granite shoulder almost at right angles into the stream. The mountain upon the opposite shore flung out a buttress, and the river, crowded between the two masses of rock, was caught like water in a gigantic jug. Like a jug, too, the spout was there. It consisted of a passage of varying width through which the pent up water poured in a green, smooth column. The entry to the passage was not more than forty feet wide, and where the water gathered before it plunged into the funnel, the granite shoulders that obstructed it had been worn smooth and deeply undercut by the age-long friction. Here and there in the passage down which the river shot were great spume-covered boulders forever disputing the right of way with the flood that flowed ceaselessly over them.

The scene held Margaret tongue-tied. There was but little sound from the river; the boulders in its course were too few; yet the impression of power madly struggling at its bonds was overpowering.

The emotions that crowded upon Margaret had driven fear of Dennis from her mind. She had ceased to think of herself, and her mood was pensive and solemn.

The spell that held them was not broken till they had returned to the spot where the virgin forest came almost to the water's edge. It seemed to Margaret as she looked down the long aisles between the trees that something was calling to her from the shadows, and before she knew the thought was in her mind, she had asked:

"Could we go in there—a little way?"

"A little way," Dennis repeated. "I think so. We have time." Then he paused. "We shall have to climb the dead-falls, one cannot keep on the ground in

there, and in boots without nails walking is a little difficult."

"Just a little way," insisted Margaret, fascinated by the idea.

"We'll try, then," he agreed. "We can easily turn back if you can't manage it."

They had hardly penetrated beyond the edge of the forest before Margaret found that Dennis had informed her correctly. They walked on a mass of fallen trees that grew gradually deeper, until they were five, ten, fifteen feet or more above the ground. One could peer down between the giant trunks into spaces dark as tombs. Margaret was so occupied by the difficulty of balancing herself on the rounded surfaces which were the only paths, that the murmur of the river was left behind before she knew they were well started. When she stood still she experienced the mysterious hush of the forest, and it seemed to her that she could hear the beating of her own heart.

Misty green vistas lured her on with new enticements. She forgot herself entirely in a desire to get deeper into the heart of the forest, and the sunlight breaking through the screen of boughs above became a thing of haunting mystery. Sometimes Margaret was on a higher level than Dennis, sometimes on a lower. Sometimes she was forced to seek passage along the same trunk. Now and again upon a bole of smaller dimensions she was forced to put her hand upon his shoulder to steady herself, but usually the fallen trees were large enough to make walking easy. When she touched Dennis she was unconscious of doing so; it was as if she had steadied herself against one of the growing trees that pierced the fallen mass; but her touch was like a breath of flame to him.

She slipped at last. Dennis had been watching for it, knowing that it was practically certain to come. She fell into his embrace. As she did so her eyes met his.

She felt his arms tightening, crushing her to him, so that she was conscious of a sensation of pain. Yet what

she read in his eyes as he held her helpless in his grip thrilled her. She knew then what love and passion are, and the sight of them, stripped and naked, frightened her virginal mind. She felt as though she were swaying—one part of her terrified, one part of her ready for the lips that were coming to meet her own. She could feel his arms raising her, and knew that in another moment, their lips would touch. She heard herself speak; her voice harsh to her own ears.

"Put me down—please!"

For a moment Dennis hesitated, then the flame in his eyes, struggling, died. He released her and swept his hat from his head.

"Sorry," he said, slowly. "I forgot myself."

She faced him for a moment, her eyes flashing. She could see that he was not sorry—that he never would be sorry, and that his eyes were triumphant, because he knew now that she loved him as he loved her.

Blindly she retraced her steps. She was conscious that Dennis made no attempt to follow, and somehow found her way to the river.

She reached the mill almost breathless, panic stricken at the certainty that the whistle had blown although she had not heard it. She felt that it must be beyond the time of its going. It seemed months, years, since she had left the yard. But the saw still whined, and men hauled logs and lumber just as if nothing had happened while, to her, it seemed that all the world had changed; that these were not real men around her, and this not the world she had known. Nevertheless, Margaret went to the office to wait for Francet, but it seemed to her an eternity before the whistle blew and he came.

Dusk was beginning to fall, yet her distraught appearance was visible to Vedene. He asked:

"Why, what happened, Marge?"

The question was like a dash of cold water to her. "Was it as evident as that?" she wondered. Every instinct in her urged concealment. "He must not know," she

thought. What she had done seemed terrible. She was aghast. She was a bad woman! Worse than her step-mother. Francet must not know!

"Nothing!" she exclaimed. "Nothing!"

She walked so quickly toward the river that Francet, much shorter than she, broke into a dog-trot to keep up with her. While they were in the boat she tried to collect herself. In a constant refrain the words: "No one must know—no one must know," passed through her brain. Yet they would know unless she could recover control of herself. McCool would see that something was amiss instantly. "He must not know. He must not know." Another refrain! She had to think clearly. Poor Francet!

Yet her voice seemed to Francet natural enough when she said:

"I want to talk to you after supper, Francet."

"Eh?"

"I want you after supper. Perhaps you had better come to my shack."

Through the evening she held herself in check, but kept as far from Francet as possible so that he should not be able to read her face. McCool noticed nothing unusual.

CHAPTER XXX

MARGARET left the two men as soon as the supper dishes were cleared away. Half an hour later Vedene diffidently tapped at her door. At her, "Come in," he turned the handle and slipped inside. There was a suggestion of furtiveness in his movements; he could not free himself of the idea that he should not be there.

Margaret was sitting at the table, her hands propped beneath her chin. Her head ached and she had loosened her hair; it looked like a cloud to Francet. He felt a wild desire to run his fingers through the heavy locks, but the bitter lesson of the danger of following his impulses was still fresh in his mind, and he stood just inside the door blinking his reddened lids.

Margaret pushed the chair toward him. "You take that Francet," she invited in a cool voice. "You take that. I'll sit on the bed."

The bed was outside the circle of bright light shed by the lamp, and the chair she pushed to the other end of the table. Her face, when Francet seated himself, was but a shadow seen through a gauzy net of cob-webs.

He was quivering with apprehensions. He thought she had discovered that he had entered her room. It was the first time she had invited him to her shack and he could imagine no other reason important enough to make her break her rule. Rowing across the river he had thought of this as an explanation of her agitated manner. His sense of guilt lay so heavy upon him that he had difficulty in meeting her eyes, and he sat on the edge of the chair, squirming in his guilt, ready to fall at her feet. He felt that nothing could atone for what he had done, his breaking of the faith she had reposed in him. He knew how terrible

his act must appear to her, it was so terrible to himself. He could only plead that he was mad, as indeed he was that night.

Relief shot through him like a pain when she said, after what had seemed a long silence:

"Francet, we must go away."

The words were so different from those he had expected that he was staggered. He grasped the edge of his chair with both hands, and in his eagerness to see her more clearly, thrust his head forward; his thin, worn face beneath his shock of unkempt, grey hair, full of intense surprise. He gasped:

"Eh! What did you say?"

In spite of herself Margaret could see beside Francet, the figure of another man, tall and straight as a dart, dominating, towering over the little cripple. She had been so used to Francet all her life that she had never regarded him critically before. All the reproaches directed at herself that went hurtling through her brain could not blind her to the difference between Dennis and Francet; make one less desirable, nor make the other more so than fate in bitter jest had fashioned him. Bad and wicked as she thought herself, not even her shame could blind her to the difference. Yet she pitied Francet, and in a manner loved him more than ever. He seemed so weak and helpless, so forlorn and terribly alone in a world that was contemptuous of him. Now, she, too, was lost to him. She knew that, and would not hide it from herself. She felt incredibly wicked, beneath contempt.

"We have got to go away from here, Francet," she repeated, her voice trembling in spite of herself.

"Why?"

It was the question she had been fearing yet had known was bound to come. Just one word, yet how could it be answered?

"Why?"

It seemed so simple, yet to answer it would break their world apart. She realized that she had been bludgeoning

her brain for an answer to that all through the evening. Now, an answer had to be found.

"I want to go," she returned, simply.

Francet lifted his cap from the table and turned it between his fingers, now and again plucking at the threads in it. How could he explain that they could not go? At last he blurted out:

"We can't!"

"Why?"

Her turn to ask the question now. There seemed to be mockery in it that she was forced to employ the word that Francet had used so short a time before. She felt an impulse to laugh; but knew that if she gave way to it that she would become hysterical.

Francet gazed around the shack like a trapped animal seeking a way of escape. How could he tell her that he was going blind; wound her as he knew she would be wounded?

"Why?" she asked again, because she had to speak or cry—silence was beyond her strength.

"I don't want to go," he shouted as if the words were forced out of him. "I don't want to go!"

"Almost my own words," she thought. It seemed like a monstrous joke, this throwing of practically the same words at each other. And his reply, like her own, was no answer. She could only repeat: "Why?" It was as if they were caught in a net from which there was no escape.

"Why do you want to go?" he asked.

"Because we must."

"Why? Why?"

She stood up with blazing eyes, but her quivering voice was low.

"Don't, Francet, don't ask 'why' again or I'll scream. I'll have to scream! I'm almost screaming now! But we'll have to go. We can't stay here. I can't tell you why. Perhaps, later; but not now, not now. Let us go!"

In spite of her own misery she could see what her insistence was costing Francet. Wonder at the reason, which

she knew must be very powerful, began to awaken in her. She could not know that he sought to save her pain.

"Why can't we go, Francet?" she asked in a calmer tone, her voice low and caressing, but more dreadful to Francet than if she had demanded his reason with curses. "There's nothing to keep us here. Let us go and find a ranch as we intended. We know ranching. I miss the cattle, and the rides, and the smell of the hay. Let us go away from here; from these mountains. We were foolish to come."

"We can't!" he cried fiercely. "We've got to stay now!"

She pleaded: "There's nothing to keep us here, why should we stay? I'm tired of it all. I want to go. I want to go badly. We must go! Why, Francet," she cried reproachfully, "what has happened to you? It's not like you to refuse to do what I want. You don't know how much I want to go—to get away! You don't know how dreadful it is here for me. We've got to go!"

Francet writhed. "We can't go! We can't go!" burst from him.

"Why, Francet, why?"

He stood up and faced her. "You keep asking me 'why,' he cried. "'Why, why!' I can't tell you why? I just can't tell you! I don't want to go, that's all. We can't go!"

"You won't go, Francet! Is that what you mean? That you won't go?"

This was almost more than he could endure. He could only cry: "Margyl!" so that she knew he was stricken deep. But in her extremity, she knew no pity and no mercy. He had to save her from herself.

"Are you afraid, Francet?"

That broke him. He could have endured anything but that. He who had been nursing a secret from her that would have made the ordinary soul cry out for pity and comfort; have sent it quivering and unashamed snivelling for mercy!

"I ain't afraid!" he cried. "That's a lie! You want to know—you keep asking me 'why and why,' and I've been trying to keep it from you. I didn't want you to know. I wanted to keep it to myself, so that you wouldn't be sorry for me. I didn't want to make you sorry. I didn't want you to know. Now you shall know. I'm going blind! I can hardly see the heads of my team. I can hardly see you now. I'm going blind!"

Margaret stood spell-bound. She hardly seemed to breathe, and her eyes appeared unnaturally large in her ashen face.

Presently Francet spoke again, breaking the awful silence:

"You would know—you wouldn't let me keep it, and now you know. I'm done! I'm through! They're going to find out about me over at the mill some day and then they'll fire me; old man Blake or his son. They'll fire me, and I'll be done. I've got to stay as long as I can. You thought I was afraid to go on a ranch! I can't see! What would I do on a ranch? But here you can earn a living for yourself. I'm glad you got in the office over there. You'll be able to live when I'm done. We've got to stay. I know you're all right here. I don't have to worry what's going to happen to you so much. That's 'why', and now you know it—all there is to know."

Margaret did not move. She stood as if she were paralysed. It seemed to her that an overwhelming doom enveloped them both. Francet blind! She could not grasp what it meant. Pity for him swept through her in a wave. To keep that to himself, to nurse the knowledge of it in his brain and not to tell because she would suffer! She suffer, after what she had done!

"I've got something else to tell you."

"Yes, Francet?"

"Will you be mad?"

"No. I'll never be mad with you again, Francet."

"No matter what it is?"

"No."

He started to speak but the words began and ended in an unintelligible splutter. At last he stammered:

"I can't tell it, but I want to. I want to get it off my mind."

"Go on Francet. I don't care what it is if it will make you happier. I promise."

"I will be happier. It's been a-worrying me and a-worrying me. I think about it whenever I look at you. But I'm scared because you'll be done with me when I tell you. I ain't the man you think I am."

"You're much better, Francet."

"I ain't!" he declared fiercely, "I ain't! I ain't fit to be in here with you! I ain't fit! Yet I've got to tell you."

"Well, go on, Francet. Nothing can matter now."

"Turn round so as you won't be looking at me then. I don't want to feel your eyes looking at me."

"All right, Francet, I'll turn if you wish it." She turned so that she faced toward her bed.

"Is that all right?"

"Yes, that's all right."

Nevertheless, there was silence. She could hear his heavy, nailed boots scraping the floor as he moved in torment.

"Go on, Francet," she said, very gently.

"It happened the night I found I was going blind," he commenced, hesitatingly. "I had made a kind of test. I tried my eyes out three months apart so as to know, to be sure if they was altering. I never let on. I wanted to keep it to myself, whichever way it went. But I pretty well knew. I did it when you went to bed early one night and McCool had gone to the store that first time. The second time I did it when I said I was sick. You remember?"

"I remember."

"I knew then that I was going blind—after that. Then I was scared! God, I was scared! It seemed as if something went black, and I was all alone by myself, and I was staggering, and there was a pit at my feet. Then after a

while I seemed to go crazy. I wanted to kiss you just once, while I could see you—and I thought about it, and thought about it, until it just seemed I had to do it. I was mad that night. And then when you had gone to bed and McCool had gone to sleep, I crept out and came in here——”

“Did you do it?” she asked, when he paused.

“No!” he cried, his voice rising in triumph. “When I looked at you I couldn’t do it. I wasn’t mad any longer. I just couldn’t do it. You seemed to stop me. You looked like an angel—and I knew I wasn’t fit to do it.”

She burst into laughter. Through the everlasting haze before his eyes he could see her body shaking to the wild paroxysm. Then she fell forward, face downward upon the bed.

CHAPTER XXXI

FRANCET and Margaret went to town. They told no one the purpose of their visit, which was to see an oculist. The town was not very large, although by far the largest Margaret had ever seen, or Francet had any recollection of. They stood outside the station when they reached their destination, lost in amazement, not knowing which way to turn. A porter in the hotel in which they eventually found themselves gave them the information they needed. The doctor's office was at the top of the tallest building in the town. Francet could by no means see how high it was. They ascended the stairs flight by flight when they might have taken the elevator; but the functions of elevators were unknown to them. The landing was long, and because it was at the top of the building, not very busy. The sound of their footsteps seemed abnormally loud.

They stood looking at each other when they reached a door with the doctor's name in black letters across it. The moment was big with fate. If they once went in they felt that they were irrevocably committed to know the worst—or the best; but neither expected the latter, although Margaret tried to persuade herself that she did.

"Don't let's go in," Francet whispered in a hoarse tone.

Margaret did not reply, and rapped on the glass. A young woman in the garb of a nurse appeared. Her uniform was chilling, but her eyes had the expression of understanding and sympathy so often seen in the eyes of those following her profession. She said kindly:

"Come in, please."

The room faced the north. A grey light entered the long curtainless windows. There were three dark leather-

covered chairs and a table with a litter of magazines upon it, and the grey light beat upon the plain, white plastered walls.

"We want to see the doctor," said Margaret.

"He will be free in a few minutes. Will you take a chair?"

Her half smile Margaret found comforting. The nurse opened a door and disappeared into an adjoining room. Margaret and Francet sat alone for half an hour or more; then they heard a door open and close and knew that someone had left the room which the nurse had entered. A moment afterward she came out:

"Will you come in now?"

Margaret's senses became confused. She was conscious of a much larger room, white like the first; of a man in a white coat sitting at a desk with his back to the window. His hair was white too; everything seemed to be white. Then the doctor was talking to Francet, asking questions, and she heard Francet say loudly; it seemed very loudly to her, and she wondered why he did it:

"I'm going blind!"

She felt that he had decided his fate then and there—she wanted to contradict him but could not speak.

"Ha!" said the doctor, quite coolly, as if he were used to having such a statement made to him. "We'll see."

The nurse drew the blinds, and the doctor talked to Francet for hours it seemed to Margaret in the semi-darkness; inquiring into his history. Then he began his examination. Margaret watching the doctor's face searchingly could tell the result by its utter lack of expression. There was no hope. But the doctor did not utter the dread news.

"Glasses might help for a time," he said. "I'll give you a prescription. I don't say they will, but they might. You'll have to be very careful. Not subject your eyes to any great strain. . . . They may last a long while," he added, but Francet and Margaret knew that he did not think so. He gave them the address of an optician.

The axe had fallen. There was nothing more to be said or done. They went out, leaving what little hope they had clung to behind them.

Blake senior was surprised to see them return so soon. If Francet had kept away altogether it would not have troubled him. Margaret, however, was becoming valuable. He welcomed her cordially.

A week after Vedene's wagon collided with another and he was deprived of his post as teamster and given a job of piling lumber with the Chinese. He knew then that the end was coming. They had found him out.

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Almost a foot of snow had fallen, and it was still snowing. The mill yard seemed very quiet without the rattle of wagons and only the saw whined and screamed as it had always done, tearing its way through the logs.

Francet was having difficulty in keeping up with the piling of the lumber. The days were dark and grey, and the cobwebs before his eyes were becoming thicker. Although it was snowing in wet, heavy flakes, Francet wore no coat; he worked too hard to endure one. Sometimes he misplaced boards, ascertained it later, and was forced to build the pile anew. He worked as if he were being driven by the whip of an overseer, but it was only the lash of his own fears that drove him. The falling snow made the work more difficult; it covered the boards as fast as he dropped them, obliterating the edges so that he could not see what he was doing. Once or twice he protested in his own mind at the way he was being driven. "Why do they bring 'em so fast?" he thought. "It ain't fair. It ain't fair!" But he knew that he was talking foolishly. Men at other stacks were handling the same amount of lumber as he, and doing it easily.

Then something happened at the mill, the saw stopped and the silence seemed unearthly. Francet was glad. He could not help being glad. He did not want to be, but could not help it. Now he could catch up.

He caught up and still the saw had not started. The sound of voices came to him. It was two teamsters, Mann and another, talking together. Francet's hearing was abnormally acute. At first he paid no attention to the men and their occasional laughter. He knew that they, like himself, were enjoying the rest while the saw was stopped. Suddenly his attention was arrested.

" . . . Anybody can see it."

"Sure."

"Dennis is always in the office now."

"More than he used to be."

"You bet your life!"

"And the little runt can't see it."

"Maybe he don't want to. That's how he holds his job."

At the foul suggestion there was a laugh.

Paralyzed, Francet stood helplessly listening to them. They were talking about his Margy! His heart began to pound.

"Here!" he shouted. "Here! What's that you say!"

The two men looked up at him with grinning faces. They had been too interested in their conversation to think of lowering their voices, and were not much put out that Francet had overheard.

"Didn't you hear?" jeered Mann.

"You're a liar!" exploded Francet. "You're a liar! You're a damned liar!"

"G'wan, you little cuss," retorted Mann. "Everybody in the camp knows it. What did they go down the river that time for, eh? Oh, boys, ain't she the peach, though!"

Vedene leapt and landed with both feet upon the up-turned face, and the heavy nails in the soles of his boots ripped channels through skin and flesh. The attack was so totally unexpected that Mann had no chance to turn. He fell to the ground, half blinded, mad in his agony, while Vedene, astride him, screaming in maniacal rage, pounded at the bloody face beneath him. His blows, however, were too puny to add to the damage already wrought. Mann

recovered himself, his body heaved violently, and he hurled Francet from him. In another moment he was on his feet, his eyes full of blood that poured from his forehead, but, nevertheless, he still had vision enough to see Francet advancing upon him again. With a roar he leaped forward to smash his tiny assailant, but inexplicably Francet was within his wildly flailing arms, clinging to him, hammering at him. The two went down, their bodies locked together, yet Francet managed in some way to keep his fists beating ceaselessly on Mann's torn and crimsoned countenance.

With a shout Blake arrived upon the scene and the fighters were separated.

CHAPTER XXXII

It was quite calm when Margaret and Vedene crossed the river in the morning. In the valley not a breath of wind stirred; but overhead, low-lying clouds swept the hill-tops, and the higher peaks were quite invisible. Before noon all this had changed, and a wind had come that increased in force every minute, rocking the flimsy buildings to their foundations. Occasionally a dull, earth-shaking thud made itself heard above the roar of the gale as a tree was torn from the ground. The trees grew so closely together that as they swayed their branches clashed and broken boughs flew through the air. When the storm began Dennis left the office. He remarked quite casually:

"I'd better go and see what those Chinks are up to. They won't like this."

Margaret did not think of danger until she saw the Chinese debouching from the woods with every appearance of alarm. They came into the open space occupied by the mill at a shambling trot, jabbering excitedly together in their strange sing-song tongue. As Margaret watched them from the office window she saw broken branches being carried over their heads almost to the river. Sometimes a bough struck the wall of the office, or fell with a slithering sound from the roof. Outside, the jabbering suddenly increased. There was a report that a man had been killed. Gradually the yard filled with men; the woods, she thought, must be empty of them. Where was Dennis?

She would not think about him, she decided. Why should she? He was nothing to her. She wondered where Francet was, and tried to force herself to think of him.

Occasionally during the afternoon she watched through the window, unable to keep her attention on her work. Twice she saw Francet, who had his spectacles now and who had been reinstated as a teamster. Mingled with the roar of the wind came the scream of the saw—storm and death were powerless, it seemed, to stop that. There was no sign of Dennis yet, and she dare not inquire where he was. She didn't want to know, she told herself. So long as Francet was safe she had no need to be anxious.

With the coming of darkness the storm increased. It was eerie to listen to the howling of the wind, the clashing of the branches, and the occasional uncanny vibration of the ground as some giant tree fell. Sometimes the shock came from a distance, sometimes it was close at hand. Margaret imagined herself in the forest. She shuddered. Where was Dennis?

The whistle blew and Francet came to take her home. He told her of the man who had been killed. As she listened the colour ebbed from her face, and she longed to ask of Dennis.

"I guess there's no one in the woods now?" she ventured.

Francet's reply seemed callous. There was a stable where the cutting was going on. Men there of course, looking after the horses. Someone had to take a chance!

She wondered if Dennis was there. Aloud she said: "It will be cleared around the stable, of course?"

Francet was indifferent. "How should I know?" he asked. "Maybe it is. It ought to be. They often have these storms, they tell me."

She dressed herself and they fought their way down to the bank of the river. It was inky black, but they could see a light in the shack on the opposite bank and knew that McCool was waiting for them. No one was abroad. Margaret looked back at the lights in the men's bunk-houses. There was a light, too, in the saw-shed. She wondered who was there, but could not distinguish any particular figure.

Waves were lapping the bank, splashing at her feet. The river appeared miles wide. Francet pulled the boat up on the bank.

"Get in."

She took her usual seat at the farther end. The waves washed close up beside her and the wind whipped the breath from her lips. She could feel spray being blown over her and imagined herself out in the middle of the river in the crazy, home-made, flat-bottomed boat, with a half-blind man at the oars, and the slide waiting for them if they should be blown down stream.

"Don't push off!" she called. "We'll wait. Perhaps the wind will go down."

Her voice was carried away by the wind. Her action was decisive enough, however. She left the boat.

"What are you going to do?" Francet bawled.

"Wait. The wind will drop presently."

"I can get across all right. You can tell me whether I'm going straight."

"We'll wait. It's too dangerous."

"All right. Where shall we wait? No good sticking here."

"We'll go back to the office."

"Not for long," Francet objected, as they started back.

"I don't believe it's any use waiting anyway."

Boards were being blown from the piles of lumber and were clattering to the ground. She heard Francet shout: "A pretty mess things'll be in when this stops," but Margaret was not thinking of that, and it seemed strange to her that he should. After much buffeting they reached the office and Margaret lighted the lamp.

Battling with the wind had tired Margaret and she sat down without speaking. Vedene soon grew restless. His curiosity was aroused by the books. The columns of figures amazed him.

"Geel!" he cried in an awed tone. "Do you do all this?"

His childish wonder amused Margaret, but she did not want to think of ledgers or of journals or of anything

connected with them. She had to reply; Francet was hanging on her answer.

"Not all. The two Mr. Blakes do a lot."

"Geel" said Francet again. "I don't see how you understand it all. Who does most, you or the Blakes?"

"Dennis—Dennis Blake."

The hesitation caught Francet's attention. He had not forgotten what Mann had said. He looked at Margaret keenly, but she did not observe it, her thoughts were too far away. Supposing what the men said was partly true? Vedene thought. What if there was something between Margaret and Dennis? If only he could be sure.

"He's in here quite a lot, then?"

"Yes, quite a lot."

Francet turned to the books again, but no longer saw the figures. He was thinking of the compact he had made with himself the night he had agreed to marry Margaret. If only he could be sure that his hour had come. He asked abruptly:

"Did Dennis teach you?"

"Yes, partly; and Mr. Blake too." Her mind was still far away and she answered mechanically, perceiving no special significance in the question.

"What kind of a guy is he?"

"Who?"

"Young Blake."

She looked up startled.

"He's all right," she replied guardedly. Too guardedly, Vedene thought.

"You like him?"

"Like him? Yes. He's all right."

"Why did you want to go away that time?"

The blood seemed to leave her heart. How could she answer? How could she add to the load Francet already carried after what he had done for her? All her life—as long as she could remember—he had always been at her command—like a slave. How could she tell him!

He misunderstood her silence. "You know," he prompted, jogging her memory, "that night I told you I was going blind."

"Oh, that night. I don't know. I felt upset."

"You'd been down the river with young Blake."

She could hardly breathe.

"We went for a walk."

"Yes, they told me you had gone."

"And I passed you in the yard and waved to you. He took me to see the slide. I was thinking of the slide just now when we were in the boat. It must be awful there." She feared to stop talking.

"And you were all upset and wanted to go away. Was there anything—anything frightened you?"

"Frightened me! No, there was nothing frightened me."

"Oh, well, that's all right. I just wondered——"

He turned the heavy leaves of the book over and over, and they fell with a slap. Margaret knew that she was pale. She felt sick and weak.

"That wind ain't going down any," asserted Francet. "It's no good sitting here all night."

"Just a little while longer. It's sure to go down soon."

Without warning the door opened. The flame leapt in the glass of the lamp and was almost extinguished before the wind was shut out. Dennis Blake stood inside the office. As soon as his eyes fell upon Vedene the bitter expression came into them that was always there when he met Francet and Margaret together. In a moment, however, he had recovered himself. His voice was harsh, as if he mastered himself with an effort.

"Hallo! I saw the light and wondered what had happened. How is it you're not home?"

"I was afraid to cross the river," Margaret replied, "for fear we'd get blown into the slide."

Dennis laughingly observed: "Not much danger of that! But I guess the river is pretty rough."

"We might as well go. It won't get no better," said Francet.

Margaret stood up. "All right. We'll go."

"No hurry," Blake demurred. "I didn't come to turn you out."

"I'm hungry," said Margaret. "The wind doesn't seem to be dropping. We might as well go."

Dennis said: "I'll row you across if you like. I'm used to the river. It won't take long."

Margaret felt Francet's eyes upon them, watching.

"I can get the boat across all right," he declared.

Margaret said: "Yes. Don't trouble. Francet will get across all right."

Dennis laughed again and turned the lamp out. She knew he had settled the matter. He had said he would row them across and that was what he would do. She knew that he had divined her doubts of Francet's ability to manage the boat.

"You both get into the end, I'll push off," ordered Dennis.

The wind was blowing harder than ever. When the boat had left the bank Margaret could feel that they were blown down the river, but she felt no fear, and knew that if Dennis had proposed to take them down to the slide that she would still have felt no fear. The water slapped viciously at the sides of the boat and now and again a little entered. In the middle of the river the wind was terrific, and Margaret had the sense of being an immense distance from shore. The boat rocked, and she thought that it would surely be swamped. She knew that if Francet had been rowing she would have been terrified, while now, she was only thrilled.

The bottom of the boat grated harshly on the gravelly shore and Dennis got out, and Margaret knew that he was waiting to give her his hand. She hesitated.

"You go first, Francet."

Francet did as she bade him and she was careful to put her hand upon his shoulder as she left the boat.

"It's all clear now," Dennis remarked. "I'll send a man over with the boat in the morning."

"It was good of you to row us across," said Margaret.

Francet interjected:

"You bet! That's some wind! I don't believe I'd a' made it. Good job you showed up!"

"That's all right. Good-night."

"Good-night."

Francet was still not sure, although there was something strained and unnatural in their manner toward each other. If only he *could* be sure. He was not afraid of finding out the truth; was touched with a peculiar feeling of pride as he realized how unafraid he was. Life had been very good to him, and he was prepared to pay for the very great happiness that had been his.

He lay in bed reviewing the matter from all angles long after McCool had fallen asleep. It was quite inevitable he recognized, that some day Margaret would meet a man worthy of her. It might be Dennis Blake, it might not; that was in the lap of the future; but eventually there would come a man whom she would love.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THERE had been a week of uninterrupted sunshine, followed by days of heavy rain. The rain was warm and it poured down ceaselessly, day and night. The sun had softened the snow, and the rain washed it away; one could hear it sliding on the hills in every direction. Now and again came the roar of an avalanche. The river was high, completely submerging the sandbars, but the current was not a great deal stronger than usual; the water could not pass through the slide fast enough to increase that greatly.

"Surely it ain't going to thaw out now?" said Vedene. "It'll freeze up again, maybe."

"Freeze up nothing," ejaculated McCool. "This is the thaw, and not a damned bit too soon, if you ask me."

"A hell of a way to thaw!" was Vedene's comment. "The whole blamed world seems to be a-melting. It's rained now steady for three days, and looks as if it could rain for ever."

"Good luck to it! If it wasn't for the rain we'd have the damned snow for weeks yet, and be sloshing around in it up to our necks. Let 'er rain, and to hell with the snow!"

"Same again!" seconded Vedene. He took off his rubbers and pulled the damp inner-soles out. "Curse these rubbers, I'll be glad to get back to boots."

McCool pulled the bedclothes over himself. "And I'll be glad to get back to my washing. This high water is coming so quick it ain't going to last long. Douse that rotten lamp. It stinks!"

Vedene doused the lamp, which as if in revenge, emitted an odour more vile than before. Then he sought his bed

and the two men fell silent as though the roar over their heads, as the rain thundered on the shingles acted as a lullaby.

McCool began to snore, but Francet was hardly conscious of it as he lay listening to the steady pounding of the rain. Presently he began to doze.

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The avalanche began with a low growl, deep and menacing. Every moment its note changed, until at last it became a very tornado of sound, and the earth trembled. The deafening clamour lasted for a few minutes only, and was followed by a silence that seemed profound, although the rain drummed as steadily as ever upon the roof.

Vedene found himself standing beside his bed. Across the shack he could see McCool's white figure, but neither spoke for the space of a few seconds. It was as if they were waiting a renewal of the roar, but at last Vedene gasped:

"What was that?"

McCool did not answer at once. He had been so deeply asleep and so rudely awakened that his mind was still confused.

"What happened?" asked Francet again.

"Avalanche! Close too, by God! Why the hell did it have to happen right then and wake me up!"

"You bet it was close! Seemed right on top of us. I wonder where it was?"

"Aw, shut up and go to sleep. You'll be able to see in the morning."

Vedene was silent for a time but his imagination was so deeply stirred that he had no desire to sleep. Presently he inquired:

"Where do you think it was?"

McCool cursed. "God darn it, I was nearly off again," he complained. "Why don't you shut up with your darn fool questions? Ain't you got no brains? There's only one place that's close. The mountain just at the bend of the river above the mill."

Francet held his peace for a time. He wondered if Margaret was greatly alarmed. His imagination engaged itself with visions of the avalanche carrying all before it, and Francet held his breath in awe at the vivid spectacle in his own brain. He could see the avalanche going down and down the mountain-side, gaining strength and impetus every second. He could see the great rocks rolling and the trees bending and breaking and being swept away. Then his imagination failed. He could not picture the end. He could not imagine the avalanche continually descending; tried to vision it when its devastating course was run. McCool had said the mountain just at the bend of the river. Supposing the avalanche had ended in the water! Had carried all those trees growing upon the mountain, thousands and thousands of them, into the river. They would drift down to the slide and block it. Perhaps the boom above the mill would break too."

"Hi!"

McCool leaped upright in his bed.

"What the hell! Are you crazy? What's wrong with you? I was right off again."

"Suppose the slide got blocked! Suppose that avalanche took a whole bunch of trees into the river! What would happen?"

McCool was too irate at having his sleep disturbed to be able to think about the matter calmly. He exploded:

"To hell with the slide and the river and the avalanche and you too! To hell with the whole bunch of you! Shut up and go to sleep."

But Vedene would not be silenced.

"If the slide gets blocked the flat and the mill and everything else will be flooded, won't it?"

"Well, let 'er flood," growled McCool. "Anyway, they know all about it. They have a man down there a-watching."

"One man couldn't do nothing with a big bunch of trees and logs coming down all at once."

"And how do you know that the avalanche went into the river? What are you worrying about?"

"But it might."

"It might all right."

"Where else could it have gone if it was where you said?"

"Look here!" growled McCool, who knew that there was every probability of what Vedene said being true. "I'm fed up with you! They've got a whole bunch of men over there. Let 'em turn out and clear the slide. It's up to them. There ain't no danger of the water coming up here. I ain't doing no worrying over old Blake's troubles. To hell with him! He can look after himself, and don't you worry about him doing it!"

"Well, I'm going to have a look at the river, anyway," asserted Francet.

"You'll be able to see a lot, won't you?" sneered McCool, still on edge.

"I'll be able to see if the water is up or not."

"Go to it, and get damned good and wet for your trouble, that's all you'll get out of it," said McCool, turning upon his side and pulling the clothes tightly about his neck. "And don't come waking me up again."

Francet lighted the lamp and dressed himself. His slicker was still wet, almost as he had taken it off, so that it afforded but little protection from the rain which was pelting down as hard as ever. He could see that Margaret was up as soon as he went outside.

"Was you scared, Margey?" he called at her door.

"Just a little at first. I couldn't go to sleep again. It must have been an avalanche, surely?"

"Must have been."

"It was quite close."

"McCool says on the mountain above the mill."

"I wonder if it will block the slide?"

"That's what I'm scared of. I'm going down to have a look at the river."

"You won't be able to see if there's anything going down. Where's McCool?"

"In bed. He won't get up."

"I'll come with you then."

In the silence that followed, Vedene heard a sudden outbreak of shouting across the river. Faint as the sounds came to him there was something in the pitch of them that conveyed excitement and alarm.

"There's something doing over at the mill," he called to Margaret. "I can hear 'em shouting to each other."

"I'll be out in a minute."

As soon as Margaret was outside she could see the flicker of lanterns across the river and could tell that the men who carried them were running; others were travelling down the bank of the river toward the slide.

"Something has happened," she cried. "They're going to the slide. Perhaps it's blocked."

"I figured that would happen. Let us tell McCool. See what he thinks we'd better do."

"Hurry!" exclaimed Margaret. "They are all running over there."

McCool was already dressed. He had known all along that the slide was almost sure to be blocked.

"We're in for it now," he said sourly, when Vedene told him of the lights and the shouting across the river. "A hell of a thing you've done, waking us up. Now we'll all go over there and get dammed good and wet and old man Blake won't give us even a pleasant smile for it!"

Nevertheless, McCool lighted the lantern and Vedene could see that excitement had him in its grip. There was a sparkle in his eyes that was not usual to them, and his movements were swift and deft.

Fortunately McCool had tied the boat to a tree growing some distance out from the water's edge instead of drawing it a little out of the river as was his usual custom. The boat floated some distance out in the stream, but by means of the rope that secured it, McCool drew it to the bank. On the opposite shore all was silent now, and only the lights in the various buildings were left. Farther down the stream lanterns were still visible,

"They're all away," said Margaret.

"Good job," growled McCool. "They'll have some of the work done before we get there." Nevertheless he pulled more strongly at the sculls.

The water was seven or eight feet higher than normal. Not all of the rise was due to the blocking of the outlet, the water had been high for a week or more. Now and again trees drifted by. There was little current, far less than usual, and the trees appeared to be almost motionless. Two or three times the boat ran upon them as they were practically invisible in the darkness; would have been quite invisible had it not been for their boughs which rose above the water like sinister arms. Near the opposite shore the floating trees became thicker, the river appeared to be covered with them.

"Gosh darn it!" exclaimed McCool as the boat struck one of the boles a glancing blow and was nearly capsized. "I'll bet there's something doing down there at the slide. It'll be blocked up tight!"

The boat ran aground and they saw how great the danger was. Already the river was within five or six feet of the top of the bank.

"She'll be over before noon to-morrow," was McCool's opinion.

There was nobody about the mill yard, but from the bunk-houses came a babble of Chinese. Dark figures dashed out of the buildings and made for the road through the wood that led to higher ground.

"Why don't they help too?" demanded Margaret indignantly.

"Them!" McCool snorted in disgust. "It's dangerous and you don't get no Chink where there's danger," said he. "They ain't paid for risking their necks. Serve old man Blake right now if he had nobody but Chinks working for him. He'd lose all he's got then."

McCool took the lantern and they followed him toward the slide. To Margaret that rapid passage along the bank of the river was weird and fantastic. McCool went ahead,

the upper part of his body invisible, his legs brightly illuminated by the lantern swinging in his hand. On one side the dark water, more and more thickly covered with trees, on the other, the sombre forest; overhead the black sky and the drenching, pitiless rain. Occasionally the sound of shouting came to them, but for the most part they heard nothing but the rolling gravel beneath their feet and the pelting rain.

As they drew near the slide they could hear, high above all other voices, that of the elder Blake. It was the voice of a man strung to a high pitch, but nevertheless, cool, resourceful and dominating. The darkness was too profound to see what was being done, yet they knew that he was in a boat, superintending the construction of a boom to hold back the trees and logs that were constantly floating down; they could see where the end of the boom was anchored to the bank. There were no men on the river-side and McCool bawled across the water:

"Do you want any help out there?" but no answer was returned.

"I guess they've got all they can handle in them boats," said McCool. "Let's go and have a look at the slide and see what's happened. There won't be much doing till they get that boom across, I guess. There'll be lots for everybody then, I'll bet!"

They went to the shoulder of rock that jutted out into the river and Margaret peered over the edge. She was astonished at the nearness of the interlocking trees forming the jam. On her previous visit with Dennis the water had been at least ten or twelve feet below the level of the rock, while now, it was only two or three. On the lower side she could not see the water; it was like looking into a pit.

McCool ejaculated: "She's blocked clear to the bed of the river!"

The entangled mass of trees and logs extended back about forty feet and Margaret thought McCool meant that the whole of this distance was packed with trees and logs to the river bottom.

"They'll never clear it before the water floods the valley," she said breathlessly.

"They ain't packed in like that all the way back," the experienced McCool told her. "They're only down to the bed of the river right at the face. The water as it was shut off sucked 'em down. The pressure behind helped too. It won't take so long to get this away."

The operation was quite clear to Vedene.

"All that's got to be done is to get those logs and trees from the back. The ones in front will gradually loosen up then."

"That's it," said McCool. "It's only the pressure from behind that's holding 'em."

"Let's go back to where they're making the boom and get a peavy and start work. I saw a bunch of peavies lying on the bank."

"Not for me," objected McCool. "I ain't limber enough in the joints for any stunt like that no more. You want to be pretty spry to keep on top."

"All right I'll go to it myself," exclaimed Vedene.

"You ain't got no caulked boots," McCool warned. "You'll have to watch out."

"No one has got caulked boots. They're all like me; just got rubbers. I ain't no worse off than anyone else."

"You'd better not go, Francet," Margaret joined in. "You don't know much about it. You might fall in."

"What if I did?" demanded Francet. "I guess there'll be a lot of 'em fall in, and more than once too. There ain't nothing to that. You can always grab a tree."

"Sure you can," agreed McCool. "There ain't no danger that way. There ain't no danger anyway till the face of the jam begins to move. You want to watch out then!"

"Well, I won't be there," said Francet. "I'll leave the last part to them who knows more about it than I do."

"I'll get an axe and chop some wood and build a big fire right here on this point," said McCool. "It'll throw a light right over the whole works, and it'll serve to keep

us warm too. We're going to be soaked to the hide before this is through and a fire will feel good."

Margaret heard him returning presently; he carried an axe in one hand and with the other dragged behind him a dead sapling which he proceeded to chop into short lengths. He split one of these and under cover of his slicker, made a heap of dry shavings. In a few minutes a fire was going. In the meantime Francet had returned with his peavy. It was as tall as himself.

"You'd better wait, Francet," Margaret warned. He looked so frail to engage in what she felt was highly dangerous work.

"I ain't no Chink," explained Vedene, to whom the sense of peril was a fascination, "and they'll be back soon. I won't be alone."

He stepped out upon the mass of timber which was so solidly packed that even Margaret lost a little of her apprehensions.

Then she saw the rest of the men advancing along the bank and knew that the boom was complete. Mr. Blake was the first to arrive. He was surprised to see Margaret.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded in his curt way.

She knew that he looked upon her as an encumbrance and her tone was almost apologetic as she replied:

"I couldn't sleep. I'd rather be here while all this is going on."

"Umph!" he grunted. "Who lit the fire?"

"Mr. McCool."

"Good idea! Where is he now?"

"Getting more wood."

He turned to the men. "A bunch of you get in there and haul out some sticks. Heap them right up. It'll give a light over the whole jam. Be better than working with lanterns." Then he turned back again to Margaret and said in a kindlier tone:

"You're going to get soaked if you stay here. Better go home. Where's Francet?"

"I'm wet already—I can hardly get more wet; and Francet is down there on the jam."

"Umph! Keep close to the fire and you won't be so likely to catch cold," and he joined the men who were already on the black mass below.

Men began to come from the woods dragging trees which they piled on the fire, and soon long tongues of flame were leaping skywards, illuminating the scene with a ruddy light. The rain was powerless to affect so great a mass of burning wood. McCool was jubilant.

"I'll keep her going now, boys," he said. "You can leave this job to me."

Every part of the jam could be seen now. There were eighteen men working on it, and at first their task was easy. They simply drove their peavies into a tree or log and forced it back up stream where other men drew them under the boom that had been constructed. Soon Blake found it necessary to make a smaller boom to hold them. As the face of the jam was approached, however, the whole aspect of the operation altered. Timber began to appear from beneath the surface. Time after time a man was knocked from his precarious footing and disappeared beneath the water amid the loud laughter of the others. All of them, long before, had discarded their slickers. In the excitement and the ever growing sense of danger, they forgot the rain that poured ceaselessly upon them, and thought only of the work in hand. Occasionally Margaret saw a man pause and study the rapidly diminishing space between the rear of the jam and the face of it. She could imagine what was going to happen when the jam did break and the wall of water burst free; forgot her own discomfort in gazing spell-bound at the cluster of men working in what she realized, was imminent and terrible peril.

The night wore on. For hours now, Margaret had been wet through and only the heat from the fire which McCool constantly replenished made her condition tolerable. Occasionally a warning shiver ran through her, but she did not think of returning home. From her position of

advantage she could look down the face of the jam into the shadowy chasm which she knew might at any moment be filled with raging water, tossing and grinding timber, and the helpless bodies of men.

Francet was still at work with the others. Only by the exertion of the most powerful restraint did she resist the impulse to call him; realizing that to do so would shame him before the rest. She knew how he wished to feel that he was equal to other men, and knew that he was acting the part of a man now, the man she had always known him to be.

Dennis too was there. She did not see him for a long time. The light from the fire was not enough to enable her to distinguish faces at a distance. When she first saw him her heart leapt, and at its leap she felt ashamed of herself, tried thereafter not to look at him, but to keep her eyes upon Francet. Try as she would, however, she found herself watching Dennis. It seemed madness to her to keep men on the jam longer, wished to ask Mr. Blake to call the men off, but knew that it was foolish even to think of such a thing.

McCool standing beside her voiced her fear.

"They want to watch out," he said in a tense voice. "It's liable to break any time now."

"Why don't they come away then?" she gasped, in spite of herself.

McCool looked at her. He could see the panic in her eyes.

"You needn't be scared," he said in a kinder tone. "There'll be some kind of a warning to give 'em a chance. Most likely you'll see a kind of quiver run through the whole business. They'll have to get off then—quick!"

There were fewer men on the jam now. Margaret did not see the men go, they simply disappeared. But they were not needed, the surface to work upon was steadily growing smaller and infinitely more dangerous.

Blake came and stood beside Margaret and McCool, the better to watch what was going on. Margaret could see that he was as tensed as she. He called out once:

"Watch out for a move in her, boys!"

A warning from him meant so much.

There was no need of direction now; Blake was reduced to the role of an onlooker like herself.

The men were now working above the mass that was forced to the bed of the stream. As the pressure above was steadily withdrawn, logs emerged from below, rearing sometimes ten or fifteen feet above the level of the water. A turn of a rope was taken about them and they were towed to the boom.

Margaret was conscious of light coming in the sky—a sodden dawn breaking on a sodden world. At first Margaret could not make herself realize that day was coming; she seemed to have been there only a short time—or for an eternity. Clouds lay heavy in the valley, clinging to the sides of the hills, and the rain poured down without the slightest pause and hissed in the leaping fire, which was still piled high, though no one added more fuel. The raindrops struck the surface of the river like steel darts.

There appeared to be but little of the obstruction left, yet it seemed as solid as ever. In her agony Margaret kept looking up at Blake who still stood beside her. She knew what was passing in his mind. He wished to call Dennis, yet would not, because Dennis was his son. Margaret put her hand on Blake's arm in mute appeal, but not a word passed between them, and she knew that her petition was hopeless.

Francet had long since lost his glasses. Yet without them, now that daylight had come, he could see easily enough the great, brown, shining trunks with which he laboured so desperately.

"That little cuss has got the guts, anyway," said McCool, forgetting the presence of Margaret. It was his unconscious tribute to courage.

Almost as McCool ceased speaking a change took place in the jam. Logs shot to the surface of the water one after another. They followed each other so quickly that the onlookers were stricken dumb.

Margaret flashed an imploring glance at Blake whose mouth was wide open though no sound issued from it. Then her eyes dropped again. There was hardly any noise from the mass of timber, but the face of it was beginning to move. She stared, fascinated. Water burst through. Unconscious of what she was doing, a name rang out piercingly, echoing among the hills:

"DENNIS!!"

There were only four men at work on the jam when it began to break. They had felt it quiver beneath them and at once sprang for the bank. As soon as Vedene heard Margaret's cry, he stopped. To those on the bank watching, to Margaret herself, it seemed only that he hesitated for a moment as though confused. But in that moment æons passed to Francet. *He was sure at last.* Then, true to his purpose to the end, he appeared to leap forward again. That moment of apparent hesitation, however, was the moment that lay between safety and certain death, and it had come and gone, and the mass of timber beneath him was already in movement. He felt it heaving under his feet, could see the bank beginning to slide past, and as though realizing that escape was impossible, stood still. Then a giant log upended at his feet. With an instinct stronger than he could control, Francet threw an arm about it, and was lifted into the air. As though in triumph, he waved his hand toward the spot where he knew Margaret to be standing, then the log came down, falling across another, so that Francet was crushed between them; and those on the bank knew that he was dead.

For an instant they saw him amid the madly tossing trunks, his frail little body borne like a chip on the racing current: then he disappeared down the slide and was lost in the welter of raging water.

CHAPTER XXXIV

FOR a few moments after Francet disappeared beneath the seething river Margaret stood spell-bound. She was conscious of a loud shouting; of men dashing to the woods to make the detour necessary to take them to the outlet of the slide, the edge of which it was impossible to follow; of the elder Blake bawling instructions to keep the logs and the trees from forming a jam again, but sounds came to her vaguely as in a dream.

How long Margaret remained motionless she had no idea. Men spoke to her, but she did not hear what was said; could not take her eyes from the spot where Francet had vanished, so that one might have imagined that she expected him to reappear, she stared at the white water with such passionate anxiety.

At length realization came to her. Francet was dead! Dead! An unfathomable gulf was between them now—forever! It seemed monstrous, immeasurably cruel. The shouts of the men; the roar of the rushing water suddenly jarred upon her, and she found herself stumbling along the bank of the river toward the mill.

Presently she was aware that McCool was at her side. She faced him.

"Please go back," she begged.

"You ain't fit to be alone—after—after that," he objected. The deathly pallor of her skin, and the torment in her burning eyes, revealed to him the depth of her suffering. He added: "You don't know what you're doing."

For a moment she struggled to find words to explain her frenzied desire to be alone; conquered an almost overpowering urge to scream, and with a supreme effort

forced herself to speak quietly, knowing that McCool meant to be kind.

"Please let me go?" she entreated. "There's nothing I want—nothing you can do for me except to let me go on by myself. I just want to be alone."

"Let me follow along behind then, just to see you don't get hurt?"

"No, don't follow me! I won't get hurt; nothing will happen to me. If you want to do anything for me, go back, please."

"All right," he agreed at last, reluctantly. "Take care how you go. And if you're going home, change your clothes."

The old man's solicitude seemed strange to her. What did it matter now what happened—whether she was wet or dry—whether she changed her clothes or not? She was not aware that she was wet. Her body seemed numb and dead. She staggered on, and McCool turned back toward the other men, but looked back over his shoulder after her with grave misgiving.

There were five or six inches of water in the boat, but Margaret paid no attention to it. The rain poured from the lowering clouds as steadily as ever, and the sound of rushing water was everywhere, as though the world were dissolving. Automatically she dropped the sculls into place and began to row, the water in the boat washing about her ankles. Now and again a hot wave ran over her, but for the most part she shivered, though she was not aware of feeling cold.

She rowed across the river as she had made her way along the bank, blindly; animated by no definite purpose. Gradually, however, she was possessed by a fear that the body of Francet would be brought to her—imagined that men were following her carrying his corpse. There was not a sign of life near, the bend in the river hid the slide, yet she struggled at the sculls in desperation, trying to increase the distance between herself and her imaginary pursuers.

The boat ran aground and she staggered up the path, but when she reached her door, did not enter. The fear of seeing Francet's body was greater than her desire for solitude—here was where the men would bring the corpse—she could not stay, and without even opening the door of her shack, she continued on the five mile journey to the store.

Along the bank of the river the snow had melted, but where it was sheltered from the sun it still lay deep, and Margaret broke through the crust at almost every step; floundering knee-deep through the heavy mass. Now and again she fell. The fiery waves that flashed through her frame became more and more frequent, yet her teeth chattered. She began to grow delirious; found herself wondering why Francet was not with her, and the snow took the place of the foaming water, and whichever way she turned Francet was there, floating upon its surface.

CHAPTER XXXV

As soon as Margaret was well enough to think coherently, her cry of "Dennis" returned to her. She felt that she had betrayed herself, that she might as well have said: "I love you!" That Francet should have died with that cry in his ears was a torment to her, although he had managed his death so perfectly that even she did not dream that he had not died by accident. He carried his secret with him, locked in his own valiant heart. His body had not been found, though the river had been searched for miles.

Margaret planned on going away as soon as she was able to move. She had no idea where to go; could imagine herself on the train, but after that, her mind was a blank. She kept her purpose to herself lest knowledge of it reach Dennis, whom she had not seen though he had called at the store frequently.

She was able to leave her bed and to sit in Mrs. Williams's living room with the window wide open. The spring had advanced and the afternoon was pleasantly warm. Mrs. Williams was in the store. She observed before leaving to Margaret:

"Here's young Blake coming down the trail."

Presently Margaret heard the door bell ring; a moment later her heart leaped. Dennis was speaking; but she could not hear what he said. Mrs. Williams came into the room.

"Young Blake wants to come in and see you."

Margaret shook her head. Her face was whiter and thinner than it had been, and her eyes appeared larger.

"No, I won't see him," she whispered. "Tell him I don't want to see him—ever!"

"All right, dearie, don't get scared," said Mrs. Williams soothingly. "But where the harm would be in just seeing him once I can't understand for the life of me."

"But I don't want to," Margaret insisted. "Just tell him to go away, please."

Mrs. Williams went out, and Margaret heard her delivering the message; then came the ring of the bell as the door was opened again.

He had gone.

Gone! If she had been stronger she would have made her way into the bedroom, but could not walk so far without assistance. She put her arms on the table and rested her head upon them in utter weariness.

Then she heard a sound at the window, looked up, and Dennis was there.

"May I come in?" he asked, but without waiting for permission, climbed in.

Margaret found her voice at last, though her throat was suddenly parched.

"Please go away," she said weakly.

He stood staring down at her and she saw that he was fighting for control of himself; his body seemed to sway to and fro with the violence of the combat. At last he said hoarsely:

"How ill you look! Why——Margaret!"

"Please go away," she reiterated, and stood up, swaying. She tried to walk toward the door, but Dennis intercepted her.

With a gesture as if endeavouring to keep him away she raised her hands, but he seized them and drew her to him.

"Margaret!" he cried. "Margaret!" Then turned her face up to his so that he could look into her eyes.

"I know you love me, Margaret, you can't hide it from me," he declared almost fiercely. "Tell me that you do, dear."

In spite of herself love would have its way with her, and it was sweet to yield at last, to abandon herself and rest.

"I do, Dennis, I do!"

